

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week1 Lecture 3C
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

In the previous lectures, we discussed the civilizing mission and its false promises. The official version about the civilizing mission was that it was meant to uplift colonized people. It claimed to reform them socially and morally for self-governance. However, this promise was never meant to be fulfilled. True autonomy would have threatened colonial rule. Colonizers said natives could never be fully reformed. This made the civilizing mission an endless process. Homi Bhabha explains that colonial subjects could imitate their rulers but never become like them. Charles Grant promoted English and Christian education in India. But this was to make Indians obedient, not independent. Reform was limited to ensure admiration for British rule, not demands for rights. This contradiction exposed the real aim of the civilizing mission—control, not progress. The colonizers knew very well that true enlightenment would have led to resistance. So they did only the partial diffusion of knowledge. In this lecture, we will explore how this strategy shaped colonial policies and resistance movements. In the present lecture, we are going to understand the ideas of civilizing mission and colonial mimicry vis-à-vis Kushwant Singh's famous story Karma.

The story "Karma" by Khushwant Singh vividly illustrates the double standard maintained by the British Empire. It portrays the struggle of an Indian "Gentleman," Mohan Lal, who endeavours to adopt the upper-class English culture and lifestyle. His efforts include speaking the "Queen's English," neglecting his Indian wife, and immersing himself in English newspapers. Mohan Lal is a middle-aged man employed in the British Raj. He feels a deep sense of shame about his Indian identity. Consequently, he predominantly converses in English and occasionally in Anglicized Hindustani. He goes to great lengths to dress as a high-ranking British official, engages in English crosswords, wears Balliol ties, and openly consumes Scotch. These are all desperate attempts on his part to prove his Englishness to British officers and get validation from them. He regards himself as superior to his traditional Indian wife, Lachmi.

The central plot of the story unfolds on a train journey. Mohan Lal and his wife are travelling somewhere. But he does not want to sit with her. For him, she is a woman with no cultural sophistication. Unlike Sir Mohan Lal who is impeccably dressed in the western fashion, Lady Mohan Lal is a short and plump woman who wears a dirty sari. She sits on the railway platform, chewing betel leaf and lazily fanning herself with a newspaper. While Sir Mohan Lal keeps himself away from the lower-class natives, Lady Mohan Lal freely mingles with them. So, Sir Mohan Lal feels that Lachmi is not an apt wife for a thoroughly anglicized person like him. So, he makes his wife Lachmi sit in the general compartment, while he takes a seat in first class, which he has legitimately reserved for his travel. When the train arrives, Sir Mohan Lal boards the first class, while his wife Lachmi gets on the general compartment. Sir Mohan Lal desperately hopes that he will get an English man as his co-passenger. He is very eager to talk to an English man and eventually get his validation. Suddenly, he encounters two British soldiers entering his compartment. Even though he knew that the British soldiers are entitled to travel only by the second class, he invites them to his

compartment. He thinks that an English soldier who is a second class citizen in the colonial machinery, is way better than a native Indian. But the situations take a nasty turn soon. The soldiers, as soon as they boarded the train, subject Sir Mohan Lal to verbal abuse and insist that he should leave the first-class carriage. Sir Mohan Lal protests. He points out that he has valid reservation to travel by the first class carriage. But his words fall on deaf ear. The soldiers throw him out of the carriage and he falls onto the railway platform. The train quickly passes the station, leaving him on the platform. His wife, Lachmo who is totally unaware of his condition, chews the betel leaves, spits and sends a jet of red dribble flying across like a dart. This story serves as a stark representation of the harsh reality and the hypocritical nature of the colonial system, where even the most ardent attempts at assimilation did not grant natives equal treatment and respect. Before we discuss this aspect in detail, let us take a look at the way Sir Mohan Lal sees his fellow India natives.

There is a very interesting instance in the story which highlights how an anglicized Indian and a common native look at each other. This particular scene I am talking about is in the form of a conversation between Sir Mohan Lal and a mirror kept in the first class waiting room of the station where Mohan Lal is eagerly awaiting the train. The mirror is not in good shape. The red oxide at the back of the mirror had come off at several places and the surface of the mirror is full of cracks. Sir Mohan Lal calls the mirror flawed and “inefficient,” and opines that the mirror represents “everything else in this country.” The very act of dismissing the mirror as “inefficient” clearly evinces his dismissal of his Indian identity. However, the mirror is very appreciative of the look of Sir Mohan Lal. It says to Sir Mohan Lal, “‘You are a bit of all right, old chap,’ it said. ‘Distinguished, efficient - even handsome.’” The mirror, much like Sir Mohan Lal, internalizes the colonial narrative about India, that India is inefficient and unpolished. In doing so, the mirror becomes a metaphor for the colonized mind, which accepts the imposed hierarchy and sees itself through the lens of the oppressor’s gaze. When Sir Mohan Lal makes pejorative comments about the appearance of the mirror, it silently listens to and eventually accepts them as truth. While it is unappreciative of itself, it holds the anglicized Indians like Sir Mohan Lal in high esteem. This conversation clearly shows the internalized colonial hierarchy, where the “reformed” Indian is admired, while the unpolished, native self is dismissed as inadequate.

The same is the attitude of his wife Lachmi. Lachmi firmly believes that she is inferior to her husband who is thoroughly anglicised. Her words are worth mentioning here, "No, I am with my master, brother. He is in the waiting room. He travels first class. He is a vizier and a barrister, and meets so many officers and Englishmen in the trains - and I am only a native woman. I can't understand English and don't know their ways, so I keep to my zenana inter-class."

This passage suggests the deep internalization of colonial hierarchies and subjugation in Lachmi’s mindset. Her deference to her husband’s anglicized status reflects the colonial influence on social structures, where Western education and association with the British were seen as markers of superiority. Her self-perception “as only a native woman” highlights colonial subordination, in the sense that she sees herself as unworthy of occupying the same space as her husband, who interacts with English officials. This reflects a broader theme of cultural alienation and self-imposed inferiority resulting from colonial rule.

Sir Mohan Lal is, by all appearances, Indian only in terms of his blood and physical characteristics. His manners, morals, and world view align with that of an Englishman. The story also portrays a very interesting comparison between empire and nation. Sir Mohan Lal says that he spent almost five years in England. He has only fond memories of the land of the colonizers. Mohan Lal says, “five-year glorious life of England are worth far more than the

forty-five in India with his dirty.” He never speaks of any discrimination that he had faced in England during his stay there. This shows the basic difference between the nation and the empire that we made in the last couple of lecture. The nation is technically founded on such progressive notions like equality and the protection of the self-esteem of the individual. Theoretically, a nation is supposed to provide a sense of belonging to individuals and uphold universal values such as self-esteem and social dignity. This idea is rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity, which shaped the foundation of modern nation-states. These higher ideas are duly protected and practiced within the larger framework of the nation.

But the moment Sir Mohan Lal come to India, he experiences a stark difference in treatment. In essence, he is anglicized, having adopted English ways and values. However, despite his best efforts, he is not treated equally by English men. This is primarily because this is a colony, not a nation. In the colony, the natives are not treated as equals. Their rights are suspended. The only motive of colonization is the exploitation of resources, not the enlightenment of the people. They aim to reform the other not to enlighten them, but to create a group of native subjects who will remain loyal to them. This also highlights the internal contradictions in the claims of the post-enlightenment truth. While the nations based on the post-enlightenment truth claims that it aims to uphold the values of equality and fraternity, they did not stick to their ideals outside Europe.

He is almost the same, but not quite. The point where Sir Mohan Lal is forcibly thrown out of the moving train functions as a revealing moment for him. It is a moment where the harsh reality of his position becomes apparent. This experience underscores the fact that, despite his aspirations and mimicry of English culture, he remains, in the eyes of the British soldiers and the colonial system, an Indian, and therefore unequal. We should particularly here note that Mohan Lal is mistreated not by the elite English men from England, but by the second class individuals in the colonial administration. The soldiers who throw Sir Mohan Lal off the train are second class citizens and they are allowed to travel only by the second class compartment of the train. This means that an elite Indian in the colonial machinery is hierarchically lower than the second class English man in the colonial machinery.

The railway station depicted in the narrative serves as a compelling illustration of the colonial landscape in the Orient. The story unfolds within three distinct compartments, each symbolizing a different facet of this complex world. Firstly, there is the platform where common natives, including Sir Mohan Lal’s wife, are positioned. Secondly, there is the waiting room, where the highly anglicized Sir Mohan Lal awaits, representing the aspirations of assimilation with the English. Lastly, there is the first-class compartment on the train. Metaphorically, Sir Mohan Lal's presence in the waiting room reflects the desire of the anglicized natives to integrate with the English culture. Despite boarding the first-class compartment, Sir Mohan Lal finds himself unequal among the English soldiers, who are restricted to the second-class section. He is forcibly ejected from the first-class compartment and relegated to the platform of the railway station.

This is really an unsettling and disconcerting moment for those natives who wanted to assimilate with the English for respect and equality. Even after the supposed completion of the civilizing mission, a native’s social standing remains limited. They realize that through English education, a native could, at most, become anglicized. "Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect," as Thomas Babington Macaulay says in his Minute Upon Indian Education. The mimicry or the imitation of the English culture by the natives appear only as a mockery of the same culture to the natives. A native could only resemble the colonizer or the Englishman, implying that, even after the civilizing mission, the Empire continued to regard the natives as an uncivilized "Other" who could not be completely reformed or civilized. The instant the natives come to the realization that the

commitment of the civilizing mission, which implied that they would be granted the right to self-governance upon its completion, would not be honored, it would lay bare the deceit within the colonial narrative.

Now, let us briefly summarize all the major points we discussed so far. In the lecture, we discussed the politics of the colonizer's "civilizing mission." Initially motivated by economic interests, the colonizers recognized the need for greater control over the colonies and constructed a cultural distinction between the East and the West to justify their rule. This distinction portrayed the East as exotic and inferior. Edward Said terms these narratives 'Orientalism.' It's important to emphasize that the orientalist discourse serves a dual purpose. First, it influences the natives, making them believe that they are culturally inferior and requires thorough reformation. In the same manner, it aims to condition the colonizers also. While it fosters a sense of cultural inferiority and a need for reform for the natives, it simultaneously conditions the colonizers to adopt a patronizing and culturally superior stance toward the Orient. It cautions the natives that the Orient is culturally inferior and potentially hazardous. In essence, the orientalist discourse conveys to the natives that they are culturally lacking and in need of transformation. As far as the colonial masters are concerned, it reinforces the belief that the culture of the colonizer is superior to that of the inhabitants of the orient, and the colonial masters should not become ensnared in the Orient's perceived pitfalls. This dual impact on both colonized and colonizers is a key feature of orientalism in the colonial context.

The orientalist narratives always justify the colonial administration and the need for a foreign rule to prepare the Indians for self-governance, suggesting that the natives needed to be 'reformed' and 'civilized' to be treated as equals. To achieve this, the colonizers introduced English education and Western ways to the native population, primarily from the upper classes. However, the colonizers perpetually postponed the natives' assimilation, as it would threaten their economic interests. Even after the supposed completion of the civilizing mission, natives' social standing remained limited, and they could at best become only anglicized. In summary, the lecture explores how the colonizers used the concept of a civilizing mission to justify their rule in the colonies, promising equality but perpetuating a distinction between colonizers and colonized for economic reasons.

I hope you understood the major points we discussed in the lecture.

Thank you