

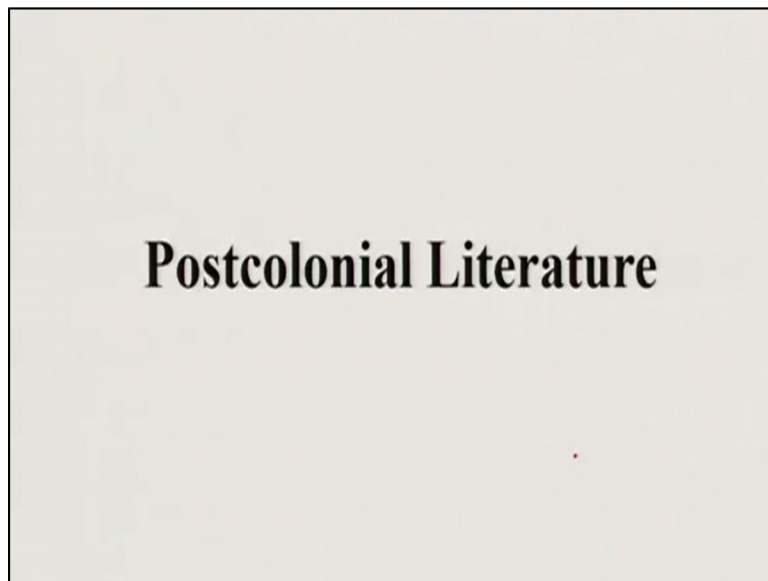
Postcolonial Literature
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture No. #03
Colonial Discourse Analysis: Michel Foucault

Hello and welcome to another lecture, on Postcolonial Literature.

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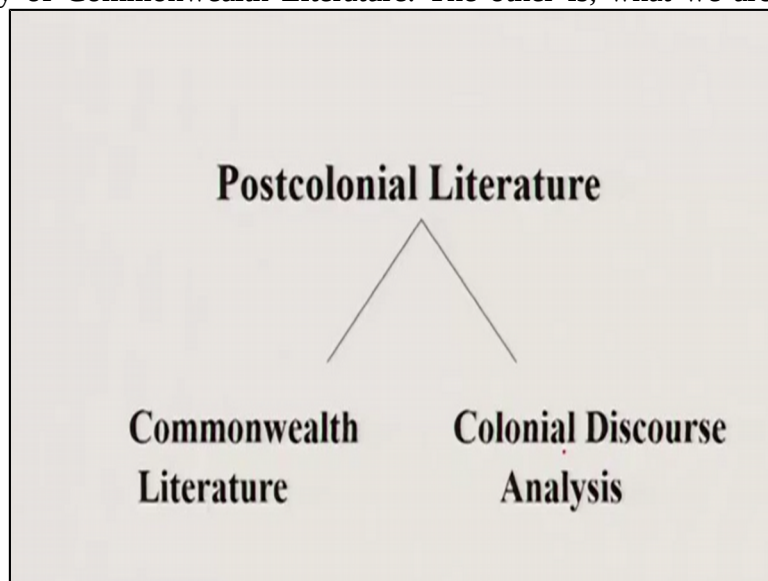
Now, in our previous meeting, we discussed, how the field of Postcolonial Literature



combines within itself, two already existing areas of study. And, what are these studies?

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One is the study of Commonwealth Literature. The other is, what we are calling Colonial



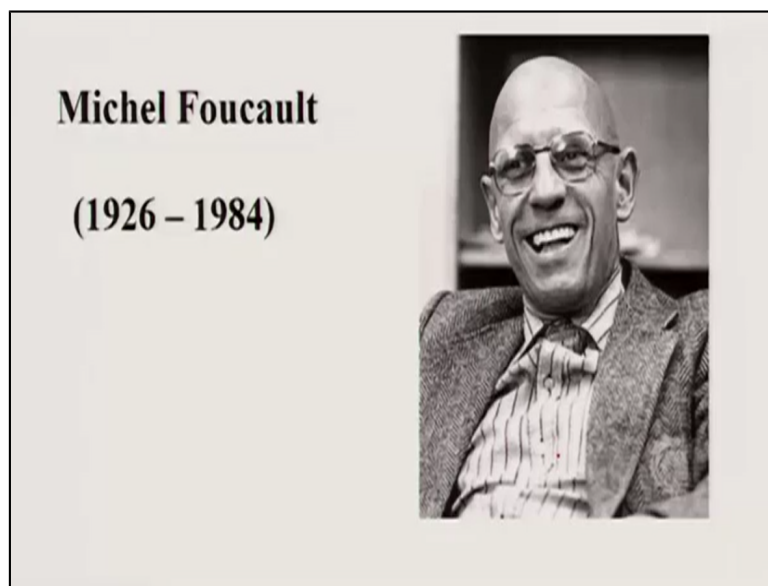
Discourse Analysis, or the study of Colonial Discourse. And, among these two, we have already discussed, the category of Commonwealth Literature, at some length. And therefore, today, we are going to take up Colonial Discourse Analysis. Now, if you remember the first

lecture of this course, you know that, there we had defined colonialism, or more specifically the post 16th century forms of colonialism, as a capitalism driven enterprise.

Where, one country or group of people, forcefully acquires the land and economic resources, belonging to another country or group of people, for the purpose of profit-making. Now, our concern today is, how does this process of violent subjugation, that is colonialism, relate to the idea of discourse. Now, to understand this, we have turn to the works of the 20th century French intellectual, Michel Foucault.

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And, here, you have the image of Michel Foucault, and also his dates, which are 1926 to



1984. And, we need to turn to the writings of Foucault, because it is from there, that Postcolonial studies primarily derives its understanding of discourse.

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What is a discourse?

Discourse is a set of meaningful statements, oral or written, on any given topic

So, what is a discourse. If we consult a dictionary, we will see, that the simplest definition of discourse is that, it is a set of meaningful statements made orally or in writing, on a given topic. The insight that, Michel Foucault brings to this simple definition of discourse, through his works like the Archaeology of knowledge, or through his essays like the Order of Discourse, is that there are certain deep-seated regulations, which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourse.

In other words, what Foucault was saying is that, though in theory, the number of things that we can say or write about is infinite, in practice, the number of meaningful statements that we can make, is actually, strictly limited by certain factors. Now, what are these factors, that limits discourse.

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Foucault, primarily talks about, three factors. The first one is taboo. The second one is the

Regulations and Limits of Discourse

1. Taboo
2. Madness/Sanity
3. Institutional Ratification

distinction between, madness and sanity. And, the third one is institutional ratification. Let us start with the notion of taboo, which is the first in our list. Now, in any society, at any given point of time, you will see that, there are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics. Any discussion on these topics, which are considered taboo, or which are considered prohibited, are therefore socially looked down upon.

Therefore, there is an absence of discourse on certain topics, within certain social milieus. So, take for instance, the subject of sexuality. Even today, certain areas of sexuality, are considered to be taboos in our society. And therefore, it becomes very difficult to talk about, say for instance, sexual violence that happens, within the confines of domesticity. Now, though our ability to talk about sexual violence, has increased greatly, from say, what it was hundred years back. Yet, certain areas of sexuality and sexual violence, still remains taboo

Such prohibited subjects, which I am calling tabooed subjects, they may vary, from one society to another, and in fact, from one time to another. But, the fact remains that, whatever be the variation, there will always be some subjects, which are impossible, or at least extremely difficult to discourse. Some subjects, around which, discourse formation is extremely difficult. And, that fact remains constant, in every society.

Thus, though in theory, the topics on which, we can have a discourse is infinite, in practice, we cannot talk or write about anything, and everything. Now, let us come to the second point, which is the distinction between madness and sanity. And, according to Michel Foucault, the notion of madness and sanity also acts as another important factor, limiting the possibility of discourse. For instance, if someone says that, humans walk on their heads.

Then, in all likelihood, that person will be taken as mad, and his or her statements, will be considered as outpourings of an insane mind, which do not have any meaning. Thus, if discourse is to be understood, as composed of meaningful statements, then someone who is deemed mad, is by definition, someone who cannot create a discourse. So, even though a mad person might be able to speak, the speech never gains the acceptance of a discourse.

Now, here it is important to note that, like the concept of taboo subjects, the definition of madness too, changes with time and place. That is to say, different societies separated from one another, by time or space, might draw the line, separating madness from sanity, differently. And, in fact, there is a very interesting work by Foucault, on this aspect, titled *Madness and Civilisation*. But, however, a society might choose to demarcate, madness from sanity.

The basic concept of madness, remains present, in all society. Which means that, in any given society, at any given point of time, there would always be a group of statements, which will be kept out of the pale of discourse, because of its association with madness. Now, apart from taboo and madness, Foucault also talks about institutional ratification, as an important factor, that limits the proliferation of discourse.

If you think carefully, then we will understand, that our process of knowing something, and talking or writing meaningfully about those things, are closely guided by various institutions like Schools, Colleges, Publishing Industry, News Agencies, Learned Societies, Scientific Laboratories, so on and so forth. If, I were to state today, that the sun goes around the earth, this would not be admitted as part of a meaningful discourse.

Because, it would not be ratified by these institutions, which regulate knowledge production, and knowledge dissemination, in today's world. Yet, at one point in history, there is a valid statement, that the sun revolves around the earth, enjoyed institutional validity. Thus, for instance, during the 16th and early 17th century Europe, it was the geocentric model of the universe, which enjoyed institutional validity.

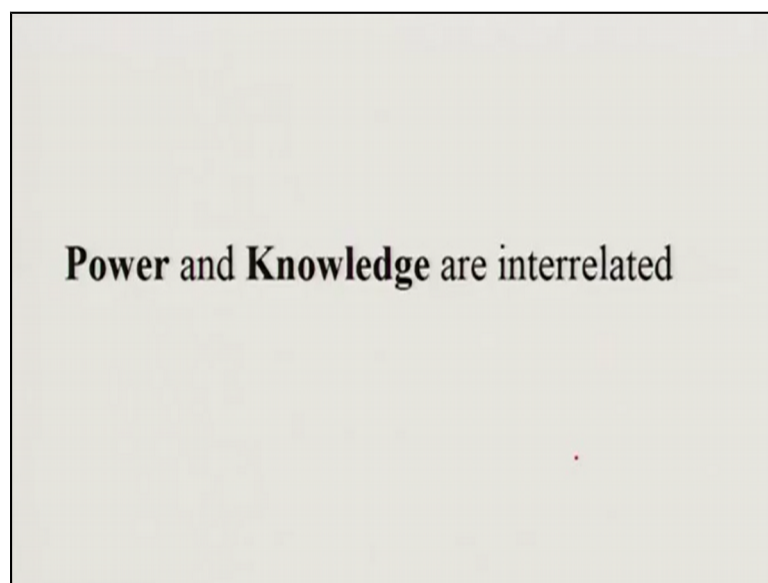
And, proponents of the heliocentric models, like for instance, Galileo Galilei, who claimed that, it was the earth, that revolved round the sun, rather than it being the other way around, were imprisoned, and stopped from propagating this new idea. As this example shows, institutions, therefore closely control the discourse, by regulating the circulation of statements, and by prioritising and fore grounding certain statements, while marginalising, or even gagging, certain other opposing statements.

And, if the social situation is underlined by a power imbalance, then it is the institutions of the more powerful, that controls, or that regulates, knowledge and its discursive manifestation. Therefore, the kinds of discourses, that are prevalent in any given situation, largely depends on the institutions, which regulate and ratify the production and dissemination of knowledge. And, which will be the institute, which will get to regulate the discourse. Well, the institutions, that are associated with the powerful.

Now, here with this last statement, we come to another very important idea of Michel Foucault, that is significant, if you are trying to understand Colonial Discourse Analysis. And, the big idea, that we are talking about here, is this.

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That power and knowledge are interrelated. As, I stated just now, if in a society, there is



power imbalance, then it is the institutions of the more powerful, that gets to regulate

knowledge and its discursive manifestation. To try and understand this, let us look at this statement.

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I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But, I have conversed both here and at

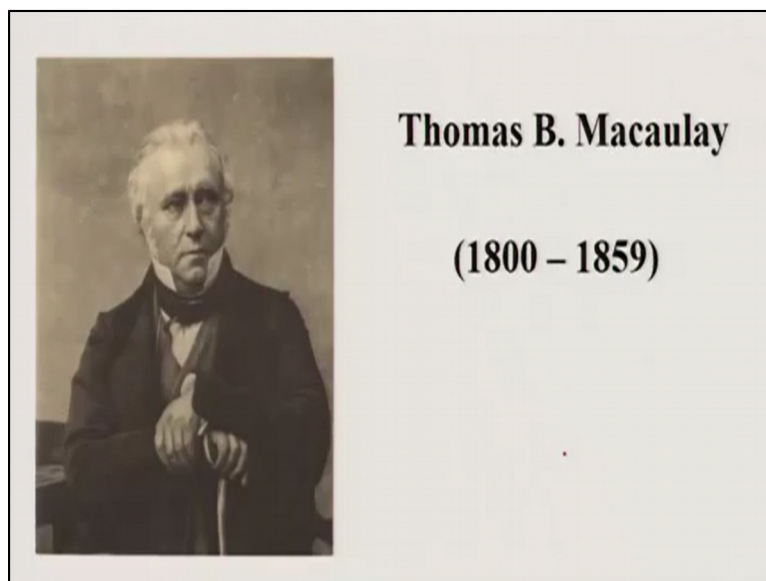
“I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But [...] I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

Minutes Upon Indian Education
2nd February, 1835

home, with men distinguished, by their proficiency in the eastern tongues. I have never found one among them, who could deny that, a single shelf of a good European library, was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. Now, this statement is extracted from a document dated 2nd February 1835. And, the document is titled, Minutes upon Indian Education. The author of this document, is this gentleman here.

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His name is Thomas Babington Macaulay. And, his dates are 1800 to 1859. And, while



writing these words, Macaulay was employed as a member of the Governor Generals Council. And, Governor Generals Council was a body, which looked after East India company's affairs in India. So, he was a part of that institution, or that body.

Now, such a statement, that Macaulay makes, which denigrates the rich tradition of Indian and Arabic literature, and compares the whole of it, with just a single library shelf of European books, is at best a thoroughly biased statement. Indeed, listening to it today, one might be tempted to dismiss it, as a rambling of a mad person. Yet, in 1835, this statement was not dismissed as madness. In fact, it was taken very seriously. And, it was taken seriously, because Macaulay was making this statement, from a position of power.

As a member of the Governor Generals Council, Macaulay represented colonial authority, that was backed by Britain's military, and economic domination of India and the middle east. The very fact that, the Governor Generals Council, to which Macaulay belonged, represented the institution of the powerful colonisers, gave the statements, issued by one of its members, an unquestioned truth value. And, this, in spite of the fact that, Macaulay did not know either Sanskrit, or any other Indian or middle eastern languages, for that matter.

So, it does not take much of an imagination to figure out, that if Sanskrit or Arabic scholars from India or the middle east, were asked to compare their literary traditions, with the tradition of European literature, they would come up with an assessment, that would be very different from Macaulay's assessment. Yet, their status, as representatives of a subjugated population, meant that their statements, never enjoyed the institutional backing, that was given to the statement of Macaulay.

So, in any situation characterised by such an imbalance of power, it is always the discourse of the powerful, that gets circulated as true knowledge. Now, in our discussion, so far, we have tried to demonstrate, how power influences knowledge and discourse. But, Foucault's understanding of the power knowledge inter relationship tells us, that knowledge and its discursive manifestations also influence power, and how power is enacted.

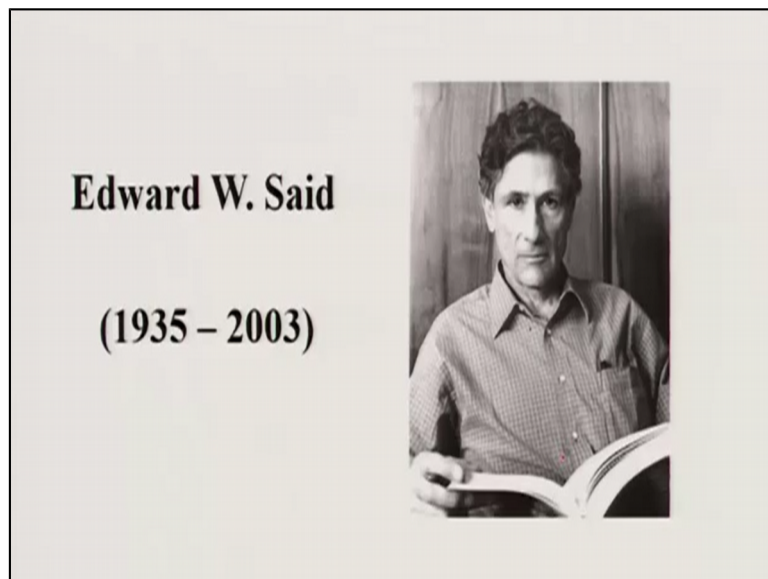
So, it is not merely power, which influences knowledge, it is also the other way around. Knowledge and its discursive manifestations, also influence power and its enactment. To understand this, let us go back to Macaulay's statement. This highly biased statement, which today frankly sounds ridiculous, not only enjoyed widespread circulation, because of its relationship with colonial authority, but it in turn influenced, how colonial authority should function in India.

So, Macaulay's 1835 Minutes upon Indian Education, was soon turned into a legal act, which was called English Education Act of 1835. And this act resulted in, east India company

diverting all the funds allocated for the purpose of education in India, to English education. This meant, in turn, depriving the educational institutes in India, that taught Sanskrit or Persian for instance, and depriving them of all monetary support.

In other words, Macaulay's discourse, resulted in an exercise of colonial power, that sought to systematically destroy all native institutions of learning. Because, all native institutions of higher learning, prior to the advent of the British, use either Sanskrit or Persian, as medium of instruction. Now, this connection between discourse and colonial power relations, was most elaborately explained in a book titled, Orientalism, which was published in 1978. It was authored by, the Palestine born American Professor, Professor of literature, Edward Said. (Refer Slide Time: 19:49)

And, here, you can see his image, and his dates, which are 1935 to 2003. Edward Said is



widely regarded as the founder of Postcolonial studies. And, what we now know as Colonial Discourse Analysis, was something that was initiated by his book, Orientalism. In that particular seminal text, as well as in his later works like Culture and Imperialism, side contends, that the expansion of post 16th century European Colonialism, especially in Asia, was inherently connected with a particular kind of discourse. A kind of discourse, which Said refers to as, the discourse of Orientalism.

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Instances of the Discourse of Orientalism

- Greek tragedies produced during the 5th century BCE by playwrights like Aeschylus
- Nineteenth and Twentieth-century texts written by authors like Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert and Joseph Conrad

And, Said further argues in these texts, that much of western literature, ranging from Greek tragedies produced during the 5th century BCE by playwrights like Aeschylus, to 19th and 20th century novels written by Novelist like Gustave Flaubert, or Joseph Conrad. They all formed an integral part of this Discourse of Orientalism, which justified the colonial domination of the East by the West.

We will talk more about Edward Said about orientalism, as well as the implications of connecting literature with colonialism, in our next lecture. But, today, I would like to point out just one interesting thing, before ending. Now, Edward Said, who founded Postcolonial studies, primarily focused on the literature, that was produced from within the European colonial metropolis. And, Postcolonial literary studies, as the legacy bearer of Edward Said's works, therefore also includes discussion, on metropolitan literature.

And, here we find yet another point of distinction, that separates Postcolonial literary studies, from the study of Commonwealth Literature. Because, as mentioned in my previous literature, one of the shortcomings of the category of Commonwealth Literature was, that it is only focused on the literature, that was coming out of the colonised parts of the world. In Postcolonial studies, thanks to Said, primarily, the novel of a British writer like Joseph Conrad, is as much an object of study and discussion, as for instance, a novel written by an Indian novelist like Raja Rao.

And, this shift is crucial, because it allows us, to gain a more comprehensive understanding, of how colonialism relates to culture, not only to the culture of the colonised subjects, but

also to the culture of the coloniser. We will continue with this discussion on Postcolonial Literature, in our next lecture. Thank you.