### Short Fiction in Indian Literature Prof. A. Divya Department of Humanities & Social Sciences Indian Institute of Technology-Madras

### Lecture-4A Plotting downfall in Khuswant Singh's Karma

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Khuswant Singh's karma the title of this lecture is plotting downfall and the story karma. So, let us continue from our previous session and talk more about sir Mohan Lal's interest in English culture. So, from our assessment of all the things that he admires about English culture.

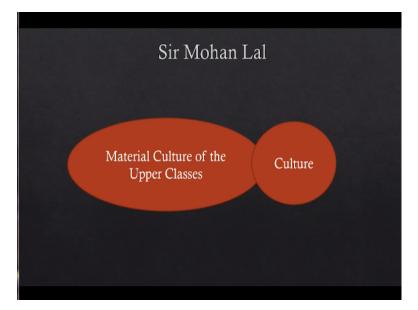
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We have we can come to a good understanding about his state of mind. We can see that he has a very superficial enjoyment in the context of English lifestyle and English world. So, his pleasure is more directed at the physical side of things, for instance he loves sports. He talks about mixed doubles the tennis, the tennis matches and he loves having dinner.

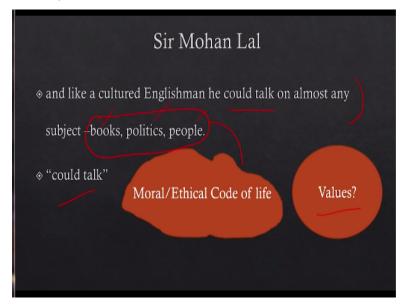
And when he also enjoys the (()) (01:21) prostitutes, so we can get a sense that he is a man who enjoys the material side of things and that is very interesting which is why I suggest that is enjoyment is superficial rather than spiritual.

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And more interestingly it is a culture that is no associated with the upper classes this culture that he sees in the landscape of oxford university is the material is culture of the upper classes and it is a 1 sided approach to life in general. So, his material pleasures that he derives through and association with the upper classes is what he thinks to be the real deal is what he thinks as the culture of England.

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And one of the things or the most important thing that he pride himself on is his ability to converse very well like an English gentleman and the narrator says that the narrator of the story says that he like a cultured Englishman could talk on almost any subject be it books, politics and

people. This is a very interesting statement in the story and it is very interesting because we do not get an instance where sir Mohan could be seem this caution in great length any of these.

So, it is a statement which remains to be justified and it is not justified within the story world of karma. And the phrase could talk if very interesting as well because there is a big difference between talking about things and understanding the reality to these things. So, you can talk very well about books, politics and people without really understanding the real nature of it in terms of a practical experiences as well.

So, again there is a sense that there is a superficiality to all these aspects that he could converse with and that sir Mohan Lal could not or does not have a profound understanding of all these things. Because if he does have a profound understanding of books, politics and people then he would have a more humane really cultured understanding and approach to people he come across and especially to his own family suggest his wife.

Again we need to realise that being very informed about books, politics and people is one thing and having a ethical code in your life and having a more perspective in once own life is an entirely different things. So, you could be well informed and not have a narrow compass, so our discussion in this regard again I pushes us to ask this question what are the value is that sir Mohan Lal has in his life .

So, what is his a value system what does he consider as the most important thing in life, so all these questions are not really answered or they are answer in such a way that we need to kind of work it out for ourselves and see what exactly is the value system that sir Mohan Lal has and it is not a very appreciable or admirable value system okay.

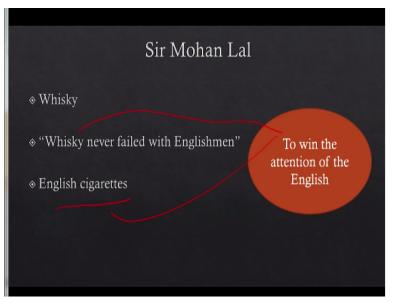
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Again we do get a sense that he is a man who enjoys the commodities in your life, the materiality in life. The material pleasures that he can derive through objects and even people become objects for him which is why the reference to Piccadilly prostitutes has been made deliberately in the story. And this against just that even people become objects of pleasure for him.

And it is very interesting that sir Mohan Lal in his mind makes a comparison between his own wife Lachmi and these prostitutes that he enjoyed during his day in England. So, Lachmi with her sweat and raw onion smell is more down to earth it is a very realistic human being and the Indian soil. And he does not want the reality he instead wants the commodity to enjoy.

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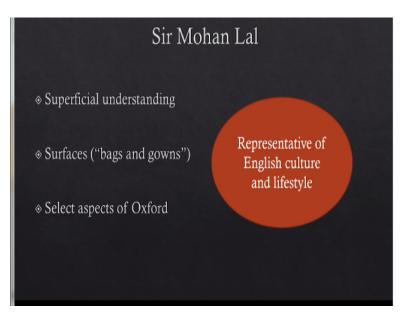
Okay the other things and the other objects and physical pleasures that he has picked up during his stay in England is most probably is whisky and he thinks that whisky his enjoyment of whisky is something that would attract the attention of the Englishman whom he would come across during train journeys and he says that whisky never failed with Englishmen.

So, this object when notice by Englishmen would inevitably invite on the Englishmen to make a conversation with sir Mohan Lal and he could from their progress onto other discussions about English culture and lifestyle. So, whisky is not attraction just as the (()) (07:40) most importantly the times news paper. So, he carries all these things with him whenever he is travelling, so that he could tend the Englishman that he comes across.

And if whisky fails then obviously there are the English cigarettes, so English cigarette would also invite the attention of the Englishmen who would be surprised to see that you know to see the there are these cigarettes in India will English cigarettes and there would be surprise and tempted and sir Mohan Lal would be generous in after share this cigarettes with these English gentlemen.

So, these are some of the tricks of the trade that Mohan Lal adopts to garner the attention of the Englishmen. So, we can see that he really wants to be acknowledge by these so called superior men the Englishmen and he wants to converse with them and kind of gets an associated superiority through such discussions.

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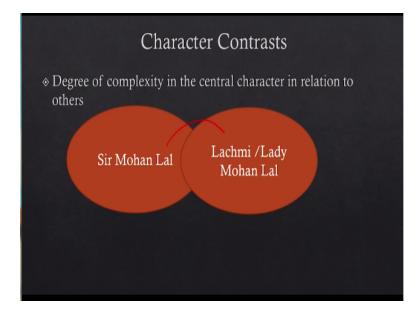
Now again we need to also reinforce the fact that his understanding is superficial it is a very superficial understanding of what English culture is all about during his 5 years of we can only guess that he has understood a the culture very very superficially on a surface level. And the reference to bags and gowns is a kind of an indication that he is more attractive to the outside rather than to be interior workings of the English culture and system.

And it is very interesting to note that his observations and his reference to oxford and other things only kind of hit on the very very visible and very noticeable side to these cultural places and people without again there will be in deep into the functioning of the minds of these people. There are references to oxfords dongs and tutors and professors and all these books.

But there is no reference to the in our workings of all these places and the teaching that it does and things like that, so, we do not gets to go deeper we just stop with the surface when we read the thoughts and the ideas of sir Mohan Lal. And he thinks that these you know noticeable aspects of oxford all these oxford matches.

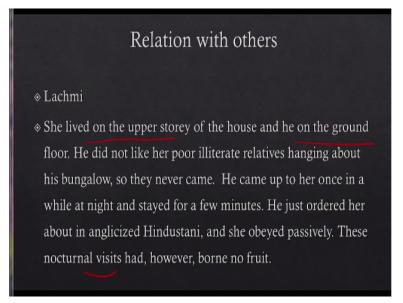
And tennis matches and dinners and prostitutes are very very representative of English culture and lifestyle whereas that is only 1 aspect of it and not the complete reality to the English culture and system.

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Now we need to think about how exactly is this character constructed because we are doing a character analysis of sir Mohan Lal at great debt. Now our question should be is there a degree of complexity to this character is there a complexity in his relationship with the other characters who work with him or who revolve around him. So, let us see what are his relationships like. So, we will first focus on his wife with whom he is travelling and is waiting at this train station at a cantonment station. So, how is he relate to Lachmi or lady Mohan Lal.

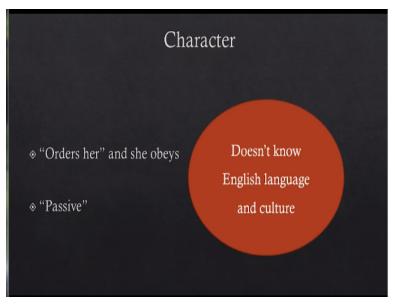
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So, I am going to give you an extract that tells you the day today reality of sir Mohan Lal's wife and let us begin with her condition of existence with him. So, she lived on the upper story of the house on he on the ground floor. He did not like her poor illiterate relatives hanging about his bungalow, so they never came. He came up to her once in a while at night and stayed for a few minutes.

He just ordered her about in anglicized Hindustani and she obeyed passively. These nocturnal visits had, however borne no fruit. So, this extract neatly sums up the day today existence of Lachmi in relation to her husband sir Mohan Lal.

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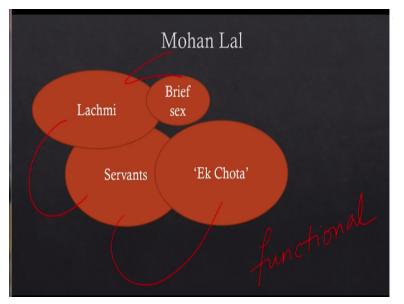


And this is a very very interesting extract in terms of several things began with their physical relationship and the domestic set of as well. So, if we go back to the except we can see that she lived on the upper story while he is on the ground floor. So, there is a distance between the 2 there is a physical distance between the 2 and then he does not lied her illiterate relatives to come and visit them.

So, because of his attitude they do not come home to them and then and again there is a very clear indication as to have they are physical side of the relationship is as well. He visits her briefly for intimacy and when he is there he orders her angle side Hindustani even there in that physical site of the relationship he does not behave or normally as himself even there he uses anglicized Hindustani.

Hindustani because specific accent and then she is very very passive. So, these nocturnal visits do not have any result in the sense that they do not have any children. So, he simply orders her and she obeys and again her attitude of passivity is something that we need to know. Because this has a an association to the finale of the story when she responds in a particular way that makes a big comment in a symbolic way to sir Mohan Lal's activities and behaviour.

And we should know that she is being ignored precisely because he does not know the English language and the English culture and has been is a big angle of file. So, because of this you know illiteracy of a foreigner nation of a foreign nation of foreign culture and language prevents these 2 for having a fulfilling relationship because her husband is very very prejudice to hers native culture and lifestyle.

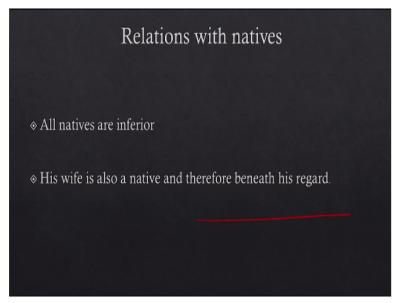


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So, we can see that he uses his wife just has he would use a servant. So, there is a close relationship between the female character and the really poor working class people such as the servants. So, they seem to parallel one another in the identity that we share in the context of this particular story. So, sir Mohan Lal uses Lachmi to have a brief sexual episodes and we uses his servants to give him serve him whisky or you know help him that his luggage and other things.

So, he has a very very functional relationship with these 2 categories of people that he associates himself with in the Indian context.

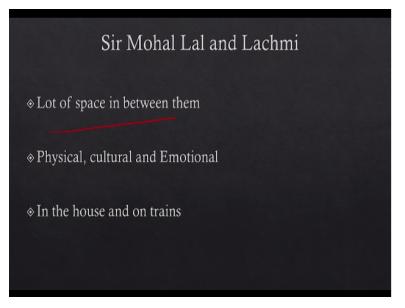
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So, what do we derive in terms of our assessment of sir Mohan Lal. So, what is our assessment when we see how he relates to these 2 categories of people be at his wife or be is his servants for him all natives are inferior and his wife is a native and his servants are natives and these 2 people are unaware of the English culture and therefore they are all inferior.

So, that is what he considers that is his perspective of Indians, so in because of their lack of this knowledge about English culture they are consider to be beneath his regard and affection to because he reserves affection and all normal rules of behaviour with his wife primarily because she is ignorant about this foreign culture okay.

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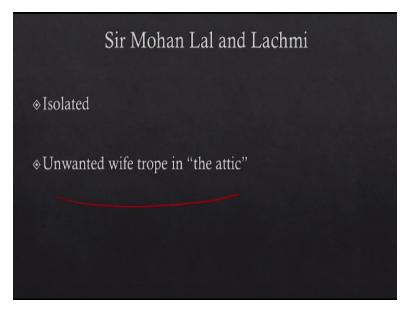


So, when we assess that particular except we understand that emotional distance is seen in personal, physical distancing between them. So, there is a massive physical culture and emotional distance between these 2. Again we should really notice this physical distance in terms of their domesticity because it is very very apparent that once again like in many of the stories that we have read so far there is a dysfunctional domesticity in this story too.

The central protagonist sir Mohan Lal has a unhappy home with Lachmi in his bungalow, he is wealthy, he is influential but despite all the material comfort and luxury he has a broken home and that is very very interesting if we think about the trend, so to speak of all these stories why do many of these stories have unhappy homes. So, that is a question that we need to ask ourselves okay.

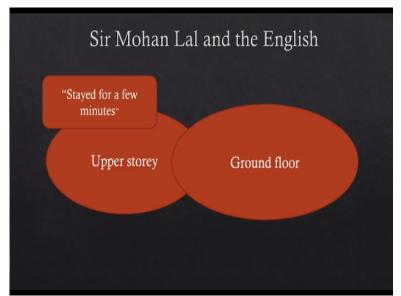
So, we can see that again he stays only for a few minutes with her. So, he barely spends any time with her in that to when it is really weird. And that to when really wants to have her physical relationship. So, it is a very very weird freakiest short of relationship okay.

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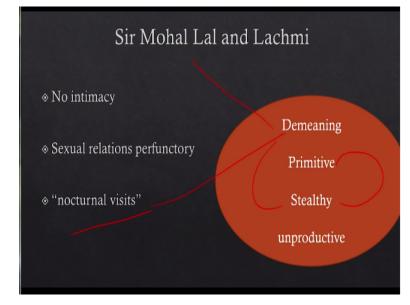


This again the domestic context tells us that Lachmi lives and isolated life and it is almost as if she follows this troop of the unwanted wife in the attic which is why I bring up this with this contrast between the upper story.

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And the ground floor, Mohan Lal occupies the ground floor and she occupies the upper story in and this unwanted wife trope is sort of evoked in this setup. Because in many of the great works in literatures say for example trainer we have this unwanted wife in the attic you know shut up, locked up by the husband and while he carries on enough fair with an another women. So, this kind of a parallels are noticeable here in this story to even though there is no suggestion that he has physically abusive and that he has lock Lachmi up. So, but there is an evocation of such a troop.



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So, we have established that in sir Mohan Lal's relationship with Lachmi there is no fulfilling intimacy and the sexual relations up to perfunctory and it is very interesting to see this phrase nocturnal visits it is almost as if these visits are demeaning to sir Mohan Lal himself he really seems to kind of stealth fully approach her and it is almost very primitive as per as well.

Because he could not suppress the urge therefore he is there but he does not really want to have such a relationship. So, because of all these set of circumstances it is very symbolic that they do not have any children because you know there it seems to be a sort of a poetic justice that since he does not seem to enjoy the company of his wife nature does not think it is appropriate to give him a child. So, that kind of reading can also be done so, in this context okay.

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# Mohan Lal and Lachmi « "almost handsome" vs physically repulsive « "belches", smells of sweat « He is scented with cosmetics

Now let us the physical appearance of sir Mohan Lal and Lachmi and see what are the contrast between the 2. If you remember the first lecture I mentioned that he is almost handsome, he is really well groomed and on the contrary his wife is physically repels of she is fat and sir Mohan Lal even calls her obese she belches she and smells of sweat and raw onions while he is scented with all these products, he uses after shaving lotion.

He uses talcum powder and there is an aroma about him whereas the aroma that is around Lachmi comes from all the native products the native you know vegetables and produce. So, we can see clearly once again see the distinctions between the 2 one is completely westernise the other is very very ingenious okay.

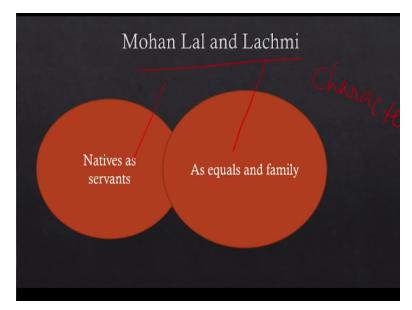
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And even though food and drinks that the characters consume are quite contrasting to one another. He has the alcohol before boarding the first class compartment whereas we can see the fat Lachmi consume you know chappatis crumpled chapattis while she is sitting on her luggage. So, and she also has mango pickle it is a very very local food it is a food perhaps the she has self as cooked.

And again we can see that he is consuming western products and she is consuming the native produce and native and traditional cooked food. And we can also see that there is a distinction between the ways that they move sir Mohan Lal thinks that it is bad reading to be excited to move horridly whereas we can clearly see that lady love horridly finished of her meal.

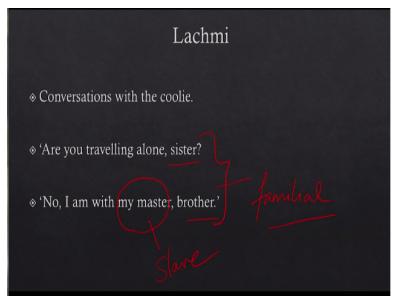
She got still licking the stone of the pickles mango, so there is no decorate to her there is no that she follows and she is horrid and she is excited. So, again we can see the contrast between the 2 people here, what he would consider as bad reading is exactly what she adopts in her lifestyle. **(Refer Slide Time: 24:05)** 



So, again if we look at these characters and their relationship to other characters around them we can clearly see that Mohan Lal treats all natives as his servants whereas Lachmi sees them as her equals and almost as if they are family. We can kind of get a sense of there is when we study the interactions between these 2 characters and the others whom they come across.

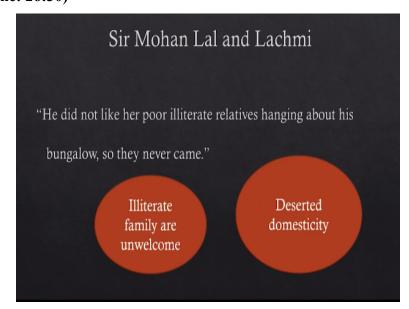
For example if you want to get a good sense of her character we can study her conversations with the coolie with whom she chats while she is waiting for the train to arrive. And look at the way that she allows even a coolie to make conversations with her. So, the coolie asks sir are you travelling alone sister and she says no I am with my master brother.

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So, it is a very familial terminology that is being used by both the coolie and the wife of sir Mohan Lal and it is very significant that she uses the word master. She does not say that I am with my husband, I am with my master even though that could be the common way of addressing the husband in those days. But the fact that she uses the word my master in the context of all these things that we know about sir Mohan Lal and his attitude to his wife and others.

We can reasonably suggest that she sees him mostly as her master and not as a husband or companion. So, that master slave dialogue they can be read in this reference to sir Mohan Lal whereas we have a familiar relationship to the people that she comes across and becomes she has brief conversations while travelling has that familial dynamic which is absent even in her home. **(Refer Slide Time: 26:30)** 



Okay and it is very significant and important to notice that he is anti-domestic he being sir Mohan Lal and when he does not want the poor illiterate relatives to come to his house it means that he does not want a family gathering around him especially if that family is if that family members illiterate. So, when they are made and welcome these family members we can easily see that the domesticity is resorted.

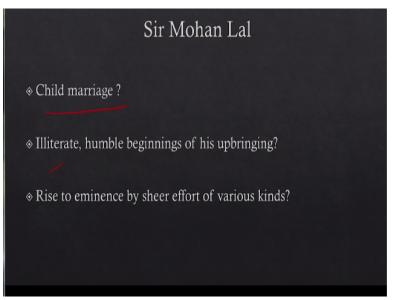
There is hardly any human being within the home, the only 2 beings are Lachmi shut up in the upper story and sir Mohan Lal using the ground floor. So, again the deserted domesticity and the

dysfunctional domesticity are the status code that is there in the household or in the household of sir Mohan Lal. Now we are given a set of information about sir Mohan Lal in this narrative.

And there are certain things we do not know but we can kind of speculate as to what could be the motivations behind his marriage to this apparently incompatible women Lachmi. So, we can ask this question did he get married as a child because the context the historical context with this story is pre-independence India and marriages were formalised marriages took place at a very very young age for both the participants of the weddings.

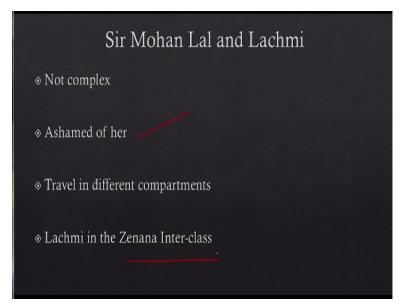
So, did he get married as a child, so which is why he was not very informed about all the merits and demerits of him his wife. And then again we can also speculate about his humble beginnings was he illiterate to was his family illiterate to begin with did he have very humble beginnings was his bringing very very modest.

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And did he rise to eminence by shear effort of various kinds, so there is a sense of which is story perhaps to sir Mohan Lal's life trajectory which is why he behaves the way he does in later in life.

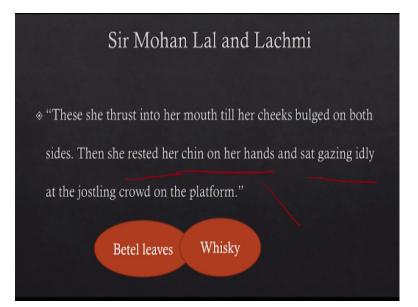
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However one thing that we absolutely do know is that he is not a very complex character, his character has a certain motivations certain proclivities and once we know them, we can easily see that his actions are motivated by his desires. And it is they are not very complex. So, in terms of his wife Lachmi he is very ashamed of her, he is very embarrassed of her.

Therefore they travel in different compartments while he is in the first class coupe she is in the Zenana inter-class, I will come back to the meaning of Zenana inter-class in a minute. So, again as I said while he is a person who enjoys his whisky she is a person who enjoys some of the native food varieties and beetle leaves is something that she really enjoys. So, when she is in the train compartment Zenana inter-class.

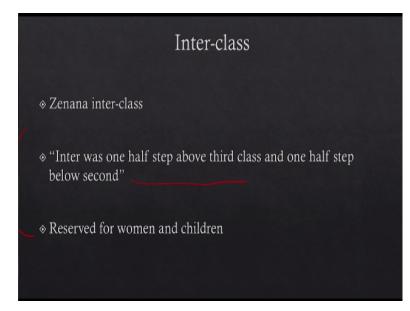
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She thrust into her mouth till her cheeks budged on both sides, look at the way she even consumes the betel leaves, there is nothing very feminine or about it she just goes for it. Then she rested her chin on her hands and sat gazing idly at the jostling crowd on the platform this attitude you know resting once chin on the hands it is a very interesting attitude.

Because it also draws attention to the fact that, that person is you know alone there is a rare of loneliness about that gesture and she is stand gazing idly, she is a board, she is travelling alone. And she enjoys or spend time people watching on the platform, so this resting the chin on her hands. Once again evokes the image of her at home probably doing the same thing while she is watching the people outside her window. So, again the isolated neglected wife trope is a evoke in this image too okay.

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Let us see what exactly is Zenana inter-class this compartment is result for women and children and one critic says that Zenana inter-class was one half step about third class and one half step below second. So, it is an in between class that is between 2 categories almost luminal space neither he or nor there but in between. So, the women were put in this compartment by the men folk when they were travelling in those days.

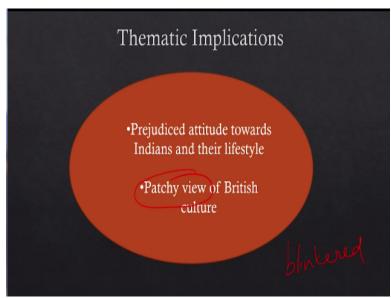




As I said this space of the Zenana is a luminal space between 2 categories neither belonging with the upper class nor belonging to the lower class the for example sir Mohan Lal is travelling first class. But in the Zenana does not belong with the masculine space there and at the same time the Zenana does not also with the third class along with the you know really poor and working classes.

So, the women's category is an in between category and the wife who is also a servant for sir Mohan Lal travels in this in between and luminal space okay.

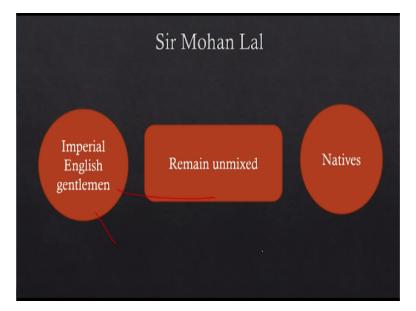




So, what are the set of themes that we can understand through a very close study of sir Mohan Lal and his relationships with the others. So, just his wife and servants and then his understandings of English society in culture. His education that he has derive from oxford and the temple and the kind that he spends at the at dinner and all these places in London.

So, the 1 point is very very clear is that he has a very very produced attitude towards Indians and the life style and a very superior belief about the English culture. And the other thing that is very clear to ask is that his understanding of British culture is patchy is is incomplete it is one sided and it is blinkered and it is only usually about the upper classes.

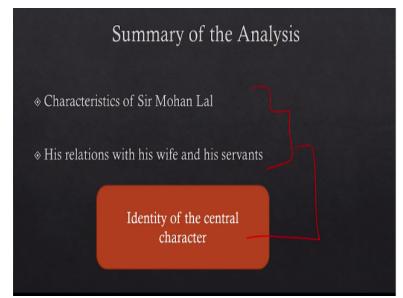
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Okay the other thing that we need to understand is that he behaves as if and imperial English gentlemen would behave. So, he is identifying himself with the colonial master with the imperial figure he is not perceiving himself as a native. He perceives himself as a colonizer master Whiteman who would want to remain unmixed especially during the later part of the colonial period when empire was at his peak.

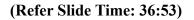
The British wanted to remain unmixed with the local population, the native. So, he is adopting sir Mohan Lal is adopting such an attitude of purity as much as it is capable in his context and that is a very very disturbing attitude of sir Mohan Lal.

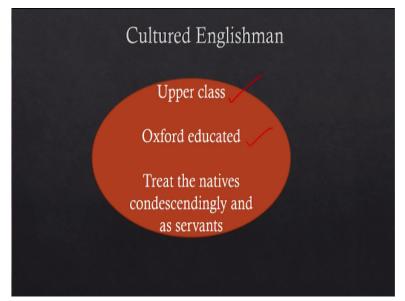
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So, we have done our extended analysis of his character and he is association, so this wife and servants. So, such all process what is the benefit of such a process it kind of gives us a window into the identity of the central character. We are moving from you know a very physical appearance and it is in locations to the working of his mind which really desires a particular set of things out of life.

And then we move into and the analysis of his relationships and then we finally kind of make certain extrapolations in the social and cultural background to get into the hard of this character. So, it is a process which networks several layers and aspects to a wife at the most important identity that sir Mohan Lal has soft for himself. So, he thinks that he is a culture Englishman or almost a cultured English man even though he is a native.





So, he is behaving as he is upper class and he is oxford educated and he treats the natives condescendingly and as servants. So, these are the things that are cultured Englishman would adopt according to sir Mohan Lal. So, he kind of adopts the same method in his behaviour in the local scene.

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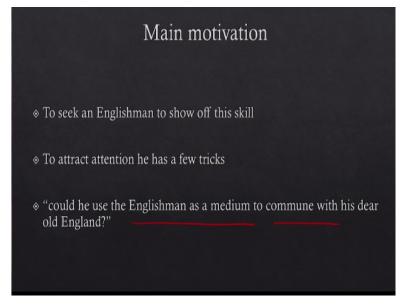
## Chief Merit

\* "He was fond of conversation, and like a cultured Englishman he could talk on almost any subject –books, politics, people. How frequently he heard English people say that he spoke like an Englishman"

Now what exactly is his chief Merit, he was fond of conversation and like a cultured Englishman he could talk on almost any subject books, politics, people. How frequently he heard English people say that he spoke like an Englishman. So, the last statement is the compliment that he gets after he has had a conversation with English folks. So, this is his prime merit in life and he wants to put into practice this skill whenever he gets an opportunity.

And he wants to get this compliment time and again from the English people that he needs. So, that is his object in life that is his agenda that is what makes sir Mohan Lal take.

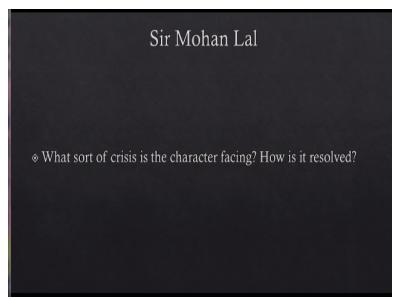
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So, since he has this merit he constantly wants an audience, so he tries to seek an Englishman to show off this skill at conversations and he to attract attention as we have seen he has a few tricks, he has his times news paper he has the ballet type, he has the whisky, he has the cigarettes. So, using these set of weapons he attracts his customer so to speak. And why does he want to do is for him what is the benefit.

The benefit is this once he has attracted the attention he could use the Englishman as a medium as a a condoned through which to commune to interact with is dear old England. So, he uses this audience, this English gentleman o gentlemen and he through them he can somehow imagine to play go back to his beloved place to his beloved oxford and he can talk about all those dawns and tutors and those traces.

So, he could enjoy England second hand somehow imaginatively through fantasy. So, that is why he seeks the attention of Englishman.



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Now so we get a sense of his identity his personality and his main motivation in life. So, we know what he looks like, what drives him for. Now what exactly is the crisis in the story and how is the crisis result and once the crisis is resolved what are the thematic implications of this crisis and it is resolution.

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# Sir Mohan Lal's crisis

Sir Mohan walked to his coupe with a studied gait. He was dismayed. The compartment was empty. With a sigh he sat down in a corner and opening the copy of *The Times* he had read several times before.

Now an opening the copy of the times he had read several times before, so once he is there he is terribly disappoint him why is he disappointed the compartment is empty there are no Englishman there on this compartment. So, he with a shy of disappointment sits down in the corner and he opens the times that he had read several times and look at the words studied gait in a very very practiced manner of walking no exaggeration there, no hurry there , no excitement there is all done in a very very measured calculative manner.

Calculative is the word that comes to my mind and helps you something about his psyche which is probably not an admirable one, one that is constantly calculating to get the certain effect and result from the people around him, so he is disappointed and he awakes

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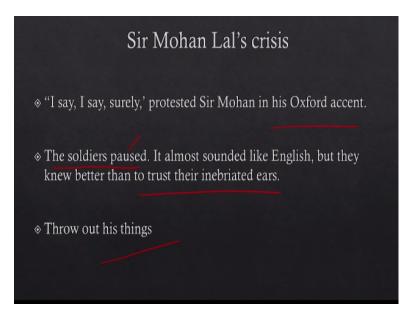
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- \* Instead of English gentlemen, two English soldiers enter.
- ♦ They are inebriated.
- \* They call Sir Mohan Lal "nigger"
- & Ask him to get out of the compartment

And after while instead of some English gentleman to English soldiers enter the compartment and sir Mohan Lal knows that they do not deserved to travel first class because their soldiers their entitle only to travel second class but then he thinks that any English guy is an Englishman sir he would speak to the guard if there is any problem about their presence in the first class.

And he notices that the narrator notices that they are in abbreviated that they are drunk and they call sir Mohan Lal nigger by a very very derogatory term their effort him as a Blackman a nigger and they ask him to get out of the compartment. And this is the shocking turn of events here we have sir Mohan Lal who is waiting to welcome an English gentleman or any Englishman for that matter. And we have 2 English soldiers who when they enter they want him out.

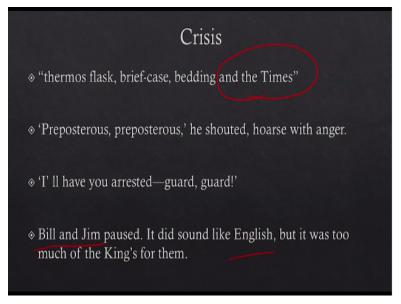
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She says I say, I say, surely protested sir Mohan in his oxford accent, so he puts on the best accent to these 2 English guys and he hopes that would get her response from them and he does. The soldiers paused they kind of stop for a minute, it almost sounded like English to them but they knew better than to trust their inebriated ears.

So, they are drunk they know that, so they think that they are mishearing the words of this native it sounds like English too then when it probably is not. So, they proceed to through his things out of the train compartment.

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His thermos flask, his brief-case, his bedding and the times more importantly the times the most important weapon in his arsenal is the times one that forget the attention of this culture English gentleman also gets thrown. And he is preposterous, this is unbelievable, ridiculous attitude on their part, he shouted and his hoarse with anger his voice is affected as well.

Because he is terribly angry and he cries and have you arrested and he calls for the guard and that guard but there is no response. Again Bill and Jim the 2 soldiers paused is the second time they pause, it did sound like English to their ears but it was too much of the King's for them, it is too fast it was too sophisticated for them to be believable they did not think that this native is capable of speaking English and we also should remember that they are drunk.

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So, this exchange between the 2 soldiers and sir Mohan Lal is tragic comic it is funny, it is funny because we can see that he is putting on the best accent and then that is failing to get any kind of response from the 2 soldiers. And the very fact that they are drunk makes them not realise the superiority of this native gentleman.

And it is also very tragic on the other hand because sir Mohan Lal gets thrown out of the compartment the man handle him they abuse him and he gets ejected from the compartment when he has paid is to get to be there. And that he has every right to be on that compartment whereas these soldiers are not suppose to be using that compartment.

Sois very ironic as well that good English makes them suspicious you know English does not kind of rescue his gentleman this native gentleman sir Mohan Lal, thank you for watching, I will catch up with you in the session.