

The Victorian Gothic Short Story

Lecture – 10

My Own True Ghost Story

Lecture Summary and Comparison

Good afternoon, in this short session we will cover a brief summary of the lectures that we have had so far on Rudyard Kipling's *My Own True Ghost Story*. And then follow it up with a short comparison between *My Own True Ghost Story* and *The Signal Man* by Charles Dickens. Kipling's literary and ideological reputation is quite complex because of his imperialist associations. Kipling has been called both a jingo imperialist with racist prejudices and a fantastic magical storyteller.

My Own True Ghost Story appeared in 1888; the story begins with reference to Walter Besant, who had inspired Kipling to become a writer. It goes on to say that while anything from viceroy to a vernacular people may be treated with levity, an Indian ghost needs to be treated with reverence. The statement prioritizes the cultural facet of the colony over and above the social and political reality. Then Kipling gives us a rundown of the many ghosts that haunt the Indian landscape.

We get through this rundown a complete picture of the cultural categories of the colony as seen by the empire. Fat pobby corpses, women who died at childbirth who call seductively to male passersby and the little children who have been thrown into wells are all native ghosts. The Orient in the words of Edward Said (Refer Time: 02:10) is pictured as mysterious, barbaric, irrational, seductive and dangerous. This is a dysfunctional cross section of the Indian society—these supernatural embodiments of the ways of life of this bleak colonial landscape as encountered by the colonizer; however, the vernacular ghosts have no power over the sahibs.

The hierarchy sustains through or is replicated in the supernatural. We also have a list of English ghosts. The older provinces are overrun by haunted houses and ghostly armies march through their main thoroughfare. These allude to the history or the past of the empire in the colony. The statement brings the past in contact with the present as is characteristic of the gothic genre. The story is set in a dak bungalow; dak bungalows are administrative rest houses set up by the British government. The dak bungalows

caretakers are the khansamahs and we see a collapsing of the features of the bungalow with that of the khansamah, who is as decrepit and old as the bungalow is.

According to the narrator, the khansamah jabbers, mows and trembles and constantly chatters senilely about the glories of the past, when he had served some sahib or the other. One can interpret this figure in multiple ways. One is that Kipling narrates the glories of the empire through the figure of the khansamah, the other is that the khansamah represents the ways in which the picture of the empire gets grossly distorted, when it is embedded in the cultural inheritances of the colony. We also encounter mix and match phrases like brandy-shrab later on in the narrative. The khansamah is a hybrid mediating figure between the sahib and the natives. The meals that he serves are curious blends of the native and the English. One also has reason to doubt whether the khansamah is not as senile as the narrator makes him out to be and if he is subtly undermining the authority of the sahibs through comparison between his dead and gone sahibs and his own longevity. He also tries to subvert the status quo in many small and available ways, even when he appears to be slavish. Like when he says dog's rations instead of man's victuals to describe the narrator's meal.

The dak bungalow is seen as an unpleasant space with bed bugs, snakes, rotten and unrepaired with not even a fowl for dinner. There are also the gothic tropes of lunacy and draftiness that is associated with the dak bungalows. Katmal dak bungalow stands on a by path largely used by native sub deputy assistants, which is a fact which will gain great relevance as the story goes on.

The bungalow has flimsy partition walls and the footfalls echo. The narrative of the imperial gothic understands the other the foreign in terms of mysticism, degeneracy, irrationality and barbarism. The Arabian Nights reinforced this idea of the Orient. Bertha in Jane Eyre the dark beauty who haunts the mansion as a madwoman is an example of the imperial gothic. Jane receives an inheritance from her uncle who was a wine merchant in Madeira. Thus the colony is a place of fortunes, but it is also a place that poses great risks and threats to British minds, bodies and souls. In Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, it is a stolen Indian diamond that wreaks havoc. The priests are represented as dangerous mysterious and superstitious which are taken to be the characteristics of all Oriental figures. Collins portrays the English as greedy bringing upon themselves the wrath of the Orient. There is also Mister Jennings, who is a half English man and half

eastern man. This also foregrounds a fear of racial impurity or contamination, of individual regression, of going native.

The Dracula is another figure who is racially impure and the foreign is always that which is represented as gothic. Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* brings forth the possibility of the degeneration of the English race and also brings out the contradictions that underlie the colonial project. The characteristics of the natural elements of the landscape are conflated as the characteristics of the people who inhabit the landscape. The rain and the wind, splash, gurgle and moan and the toddy palms rattle and roar. It is considered a hostile threatening atmosphere.

The narrator says that it was just the kind of evening and the kind of meal to make a man think of every single one of his past sins and all the others that he intended to commit if he lived. Later on when he finds sleeping difficult he blames it on the wind that is talking nonsense much like the khansamah is bound to do in certain occasions. We realize that he is highly attuned to the sounds of the night as he hears the doolie bearers. They come with a 'let us take and heave him over' grunt. He thinks that it is some native assistant, he speculates that the native assistant is going to talk and spit and smoke for an hour which speaks again for the degeneracy of the colony in the eyes of the colonizer.

He hears a whir and a click and is absolutely convinced that the sound could be nothing but a game of billiards. The more that he knows of the improbability of such a game in the dak bungalow the more he is convinced of some supernatural activity. The narrative speaks of the fear of something that cannot be seen and the physiological effects of such fear are described, taking the story deeper into gothic territory. He says that a dak bungalow breeds infinite credulity. Anything is believable in a dak bungalow.

The implication is that the British empire has been tainted or influenced by the native territory, making anything credulous. He is afraid that the players, the billiard players in the room next door, might want him for a marker. He knows both that it is an absurd fear and that it is nevertheless a real fear. The next morning when he inquires about the doolies, the khansamah informs him that there were no doolies. The khansamah gives him a story of this bungalow having once been a billiards room. These are physical remnants of the empire.

A weird kind of power relationship is orchestrated by the khansamah when he says that the railway officials are all dead and gone while he Mangal Khan is still alive. The ghost for the narrator is now an authenticated article and the narrator wants to write to the Society of Psychical Research and paralyze the empire with his news. He hopes to have all the glory and curiosity that is attached with supernatural occurrences; however, he soon realizes that it was just a restless little rat in the ceiling cloth and a loose window sash in the wind that had been making the noise.

The discovery of facts does not allow the narrator to encash his own hallmarked true ghost story in the empire. Kadir Baksh, the narrator's servant, makes a very late entry into the story and he tells the narrator that the presence in the bungalow is speckled and disturbed because of the presence of low caste figures who had been let in by the khansamah. This native figure appears to follow a hierarchy that is cultural, supernatural, native and English. However, the narrator claims that Kadir Baksh has taken a bribe from the doolie bearers and that it was his... it was with his knowledge that the khansamah let them stay the night.

He states that Kadir Baksh has no notions of morality and this is a statement that includes the whole of the colonial world in it. The natives have an apparent loyalty which they also try to exploit for their own benefit. The narrator tries to get the facts out of the khansamah, but he promptly loses his head and shifts the tragic death of the fat engineer sahib all over the landscape of India. The narrator is saddened by the realization that there is in fact, no ghost, suggesting that facts took away from him the supernatural opportunity that he could have lain claim to.

Having covered the summary will now go on to a short comparison between the Signal Man by Dickens and My Own True Ghost Story by Kipling. In terms of the usage of gothic motives and in the setting that the stories unfold in, The Signal Man by Dickens and My Own True Ghost Story by Kipling are very much similar.

Both capture a barbarous and bleak atmosphere that is somehow detached from what is considered the normal. In both cases it is the necessities of the employment of these characters that restrict them to these unpleasant quarters. However, there are also many differences in the ways in which the narratives of the two stories work. Oftentimes My Own True Ghost Story seems to be acting as a foil to the narrative of The Signal Man.

For instance, consider the reference to the railways. In *The Signal Man* the train is invested with gothic or supernatural characteristics. It is powerful.

However in the *Ghost Story*, the railways are not treated as powerful or as glorious when spoken by the khansamah. They turn out to be references that he uses to subvert the narrative of the empire's glory. There is at once a sense of slavishness as well as a suggestion that the colony is challenging the empire that has laid out networks and assessments over its landscape. In Dickens's story, there is a constant confusion as to whether the signalman is hallucinating and this confusion reaffirms the supernatural in the narrative; however, the supernatural in the *Ghost Story* turns out to be simply a deception of the senses induced by the elemental realities of the colony.

While Dickens's gothic is concerned with the inexplicable, Kipling's is concerned with the unreasonable where the supernatural turns out to be a mere fabrication of the narrator's mind. This may be extended to the discovery of facts in the two stories. In *The Signal Man*, the facts that are made available make stronger the claims about the spectral haunting of the railway line. Whereas in the *Ghost Story*, the facts dissipate the supernatural. In the first case technology is the realm where the past and the present engage in a supernatural exchange and the many anxieties of the modern are voiced through the gothic narrative. In the second case the colony is the site where the power relations between the empire and its subjects are exercised and undermined through gothic possibilities. That concludes this short session.

Thank you very much.