REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 31

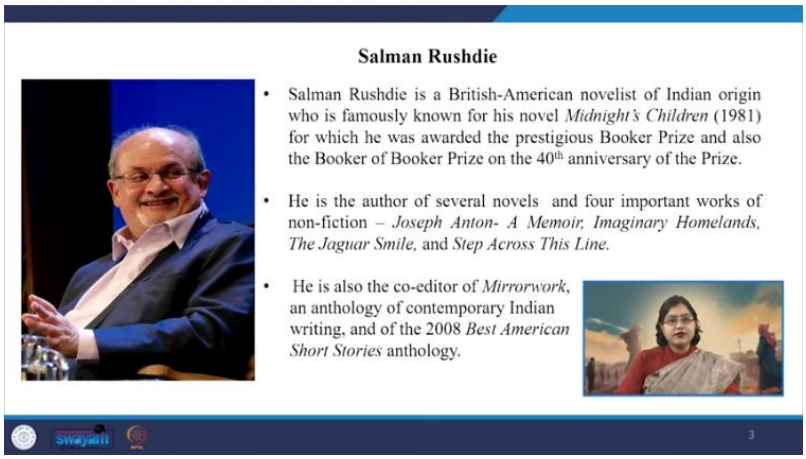
Lecture 31: Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands"

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we are going to do a case study based on our understanding of Salman Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands. So, Imaginary Homelands is a seminal collection of essays written by Salman Rushdie between the 1970s and 1990s. This entire work was written and compiled over a period of two decades,

and it includes important events of political and literary criticism. The collection of essays was first published in the year 1991. Some of the crucial interventions in this study include the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the general election victory of Congress in the year 1983, and the issues of censorship as well as Palestinian identity. So it talks mainly about mainland Indian politics but also refers to the question of Palestinian identity and the unrest in the Middle East. This timeline between the 1970s and 1990s is also important for understanding the historical context and the evolution of Rushdie's ideas and his growth

as an author and as a critic. The collection explores themes of exile, identity, and belonging, and it delves into the complexities of cultural hybridity and the impact of colonialism on post-colonial societies. Salman Rushdie is a British-American novelist of Indian origin,

famously known for his novel Midnight's Children, which came out in 1981, and for this work, he was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize as well as the Booker of Bookers Prize on the 40th anniversary of the award. Rushdie is the author of several novels and four important works of nonfiction, which include Joseph Anton: A Memoir, Imaginary Homelands, The Jaguar Smile, and Step Across This Line. He is also the co-editor of Mirror Work, an anthology of contemporary Indian writing, and of the 2008 Best American Short Stories anthology.



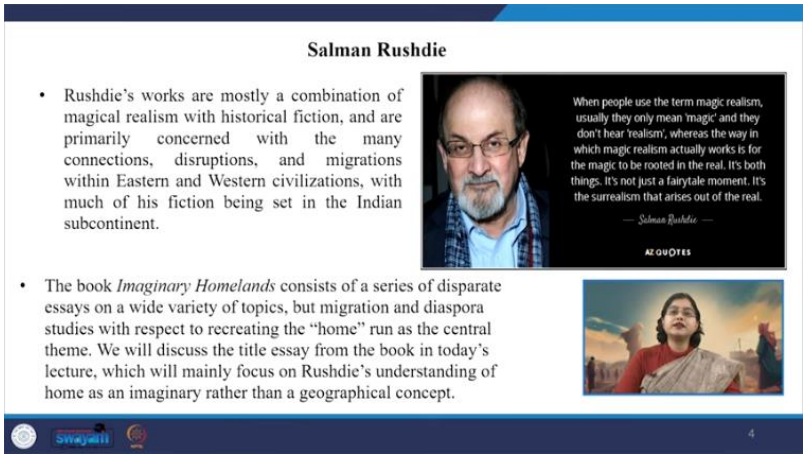
Rushdie's works are mostly a combination of magical realism with historical fiction and they are primarily concerned with the many connections, disruptions and migrations within eastern and western civilizations with much of his fiction being set in the Indian subcontinent. So, to refer to Rushdie's quote, when people use the term magic realism, usually they only mean magic and they don't hear realism, whereas the way in which magic realism actually works is for the magic to be rooted in the real. It is both things.

It's not just a fairy tale moment. It's the surrealism that arises out of the real. Right. So he is actually defining the paradigm of magical realism. Right.

He is defining what magic realism or magical realism is. It is not absolutely taking off from reality. But it is a way of implementing or deploying magic towards commenting on and critiquing the real society, the evils, the problematics associated with the real society. So the magic as a device is used for commenting on the problematics in a given society, the limitations of a given society.

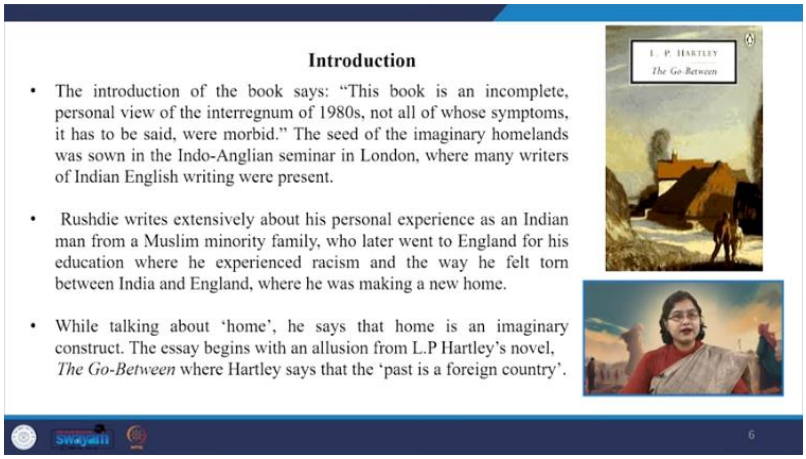
So, magical realism, as we know, can actually express concerns about social evils, including, you know, racist practices, including the problematic aspects associated with nations and national boundaries, including ethnic conflicts, and so on. So, the book

Imaginary Homelands consists of a series of disparate essays on a variety of topics, but migration and diaspora studies with respect to recreating or reimagining the home run as the central topic. Theme or the common thread throughout the work. So, in today's lecture, we will discuss the title essay from the book Imaginary Homelands, which will mainly focus on Rushdie's understanding of the home as an imaginary rather than a geographical concept. So,



A home that is mainly a part of our psychic space, a part of our mental landscape rather than the real coordinates of it, rather than its real existence. So here we have some of the very well-known and well-acclaimed works by Salman Rushdie: Midnight's Children, Grimus, Shame, which is a much-controversial novel, and Haroun and the Sea of Stories. Coming back to Imaginary Homelands, the introduction of the book says, and I quote from the book, 'This book is an incomplete personal view of the interregnum of the 1980s, not all of whose symptoms, it has to be said, were morbid.' Unquote. The seed of Imaginary Homelands was sown in the Indo-Anglian seminar that took place in London, where many writers of Indian English literature were present.

Rushdie writes extensively about his personal experience as an Indian man from a Muslim minority family who later went to England for his education, where he experienced racism and the way he felt torn between India, his homeland, and England, where he acquired his education and degree. Right, And where he was trying to make a new home. While talking about this concept of home, Rushdie says that home is an imaginary construct. And the essay, therefore, begins with an allusion from L.P.



Hartley's novel, The Go-Between, where Hartley says that the past is a foreign country. An old photograph is introduced right at the beginning of the essay, which reminds the writer of his past. The metaphor reminds the poet of his ancestral home, which is a three-storied house with a triangular roof structure. And this is how the beginning goes. You know, I'll just read from the excerpt.

An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It's a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. So this is how the extended excerpt goes. I would read from the excerpt. An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work.

It's a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar, a three-storied gabled affair with tiled roofs and round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointy tiled hat. The past is a foreign country, goes the famous opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel, The Go-Between. They do things differently there.

But the photograph tells me to invert this idea. It reminds me that it's my present that is foreign and the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time. Rushdie goes on to describe his visit to his home in Bombay a few years ago. He saw his father's house again after a long time. He opened his father's telephone directory and looked for his father's name there.

And I'll go back to another excerpt from the work. And amazingly, there it was—his name, our old address, the unchanged telephone number—as if we had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an eerie discovery. I felt as if I were being claimed or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions and that this continuity

was the reality. So there is this blur between what is past and what is present, what is far away, what is near, what is reality, what is illusion.

That is basically what defines existence in diaspora—moving back and forth between homeland and hostland, where there is this imagination of a cracked mirror, a kind of optical illusion, right? So, Rushdie reflects on how this past identity restored in him the inspiration to write the novel Midnight's Children. He realizes that diaspora authors like him try to create fictionalized versions of themselves in their works of fiction, as they remain distant from the physical reality of the places in which they grew up before migrating. They try to produce a replica of their home in fiction, through fiction, which produces or rather reproduces, represents the imaginary homeland.

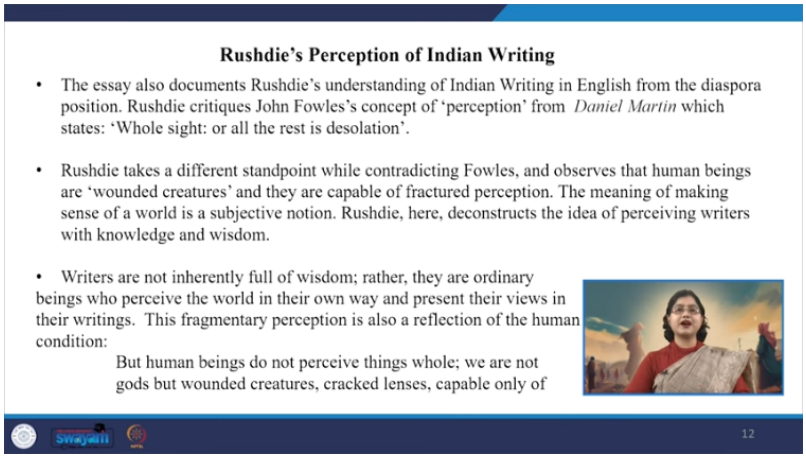
So regarding the challenges that the Indian diasporic writers face, Rushdie states the following, I quote him, It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." So, India as the home country resides somewhere in the imagination of the diaspora.

Their writings reflect a version of India which cannot be claimed, which cannot be really identified or pinpointed in the real coordinates anymore as something definitive, something that is out there and existing. Sometimes it can therefore be wishful. So, this imagination and representation of India by the Indian diaspora can have a very strong wishful content or component. So, the protagonist of Midnight's Children, Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator with a fallible memory. Rushdie states the following about Saleem Sinai.

This is why I made my narrator Saleem suspect in his narration. His mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance and his vision is fragmentary. It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." The author here talks about the fragmentation of memory in more general terms by considering it as a quality which empowers writing. He considers these inevitable fragmentary memories as virtues in a writing or in a writer.

So, Rushdie here compares the writer's memories to those of broken glass. The mirror's glass might have been broken, but the fragments are still valuable. It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in terms of broken mirrors, in terms of shards of memories, pieces of memories, some of which have been irretrievably lost. So, Rushdie writes the following: the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance because they were remains,

fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. This essay also documents Rushdie's understanding of Indian writing in English from the diaspora position. Rushdie criticizes John Fowles's concept of perception from Daniel Martin, which states that whole sight—or all the rest—is desolation. So, John Fowles is speaking in very extreme terms. Either we try to piece together and reproduce a whole sight in retrospect, or all of it is lost—all of it is, you know, desolation.



Rushdie takes a rather different standpoint while contradicting Fowles and observes that human beings are wounded creatures—fallible, wounded, limited creatures—and they are capable only of fractured, fragmented, partial perception. The meaning of making sense of the world is a subjective notion. There is no definitiveness, no finality to it. So, Rushdie here is deconstructing the idea of perceiving writers as possessing knowledge and wisdom. Writers are not inherently full of wisdom.

That's not an absolute. That's not a pre-given. That should not be assumed. That's where Rushdie is coming from. Rather, writers are ordinary human beings with their own limitations, and they perceive the world in their own way and present their views in their writings.

This fragmentary perception is also a reflection of the human condition. But human beings do not perceive things whole. We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved.

Perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. So, actually, lack of knowledge, lack of control over knowledge, lack of access to the whole or a holistic understanding actually increases our conviction. So, our lack of knowledge, our lack of access to a holistic understanding as limited beings actually accentuates and amplifies our conviction. Rushdie draws upon an example from his novel 'Midnight's Children' in order to explain this idea of perception.

The narrator of the novel uses the metaphor of a cinema screen. I quote, 'Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row and gradually moving up until your nose is almost pressed against the screen.' Gradually, the stars' faces dissolve into dancing green. Tiny details assume grotesque proportions. It becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality.

So you hear this movement towards the cinema screen that Rushdie is bringing in. This kind of example, this kind of metaphor, actually stands for the narrative's movement through time towards the present and the book itself. You know, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective and becomes more partial. Right. When we see anything sans any objective distance, our vision, our perspective is partial.

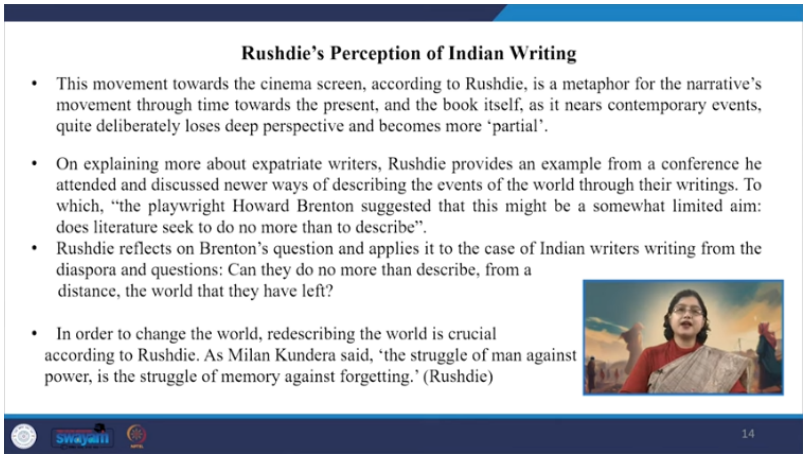
Right. We lose perspective. There cannot be one whole understanding. On explaining more about expatriate writers, Rushdie provides an example from a conference that he attended and discussed newer ways of describing events of the world through their writings. And here, in this conference, the playwright Howard Brenton suggests that this might be a somewhat limited aim.

Does literature seek to do no more than describe? This is the question that Howard Brenton raises. Rushdie reflects on Brenton's question and applies it to the case of Indian writers' writings from the diaspora. And he questions back, right? He almost retorts.

Can they do no more than describe from a distance the world they have left behind? So, is description the end of it, or, as Rushdie points out, is description everything? Can they do

no more than describe from a distance? To change the world, re-describing the world becomes crucial, according to Rushdie. So, not only presenting and describing everything,

the world or the homeland, but re-describing and re-presenting it becomes very important. As Milan Kundera also states, the struggle of man against power is, after all, the struggle of memory against forgetting. So, Imaginary Homelands... The essay we are discussing here reflects Rushdie's relationship with the idea of home, identity, and belonging. In this essay, Rushdie explores the concept of imaginary homelands to depict the complexities of diaspora, displacement, and cultural hybridity.



So, the concluding lines of Rushdie that talk about the tradition of Indian diasporic writing go like this. Following are the lines; I quote from the essay. Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition. However, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the cultural and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, and life in a minority group.

We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews, The past to which we belong is an English past. The history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world.

It may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same. I stress that this is only one of the many possible strategies, but we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form. So, as an example, a writer like Borges speaks of the

influence of Robert Louis Stevenson on his work, and then Heinrich Böll acknowledges the influence of Irish literature. So, here we see cross-pollination everywhere.

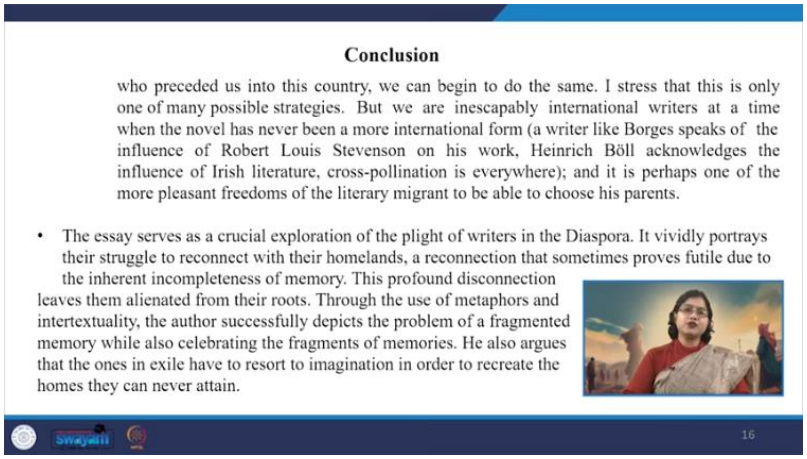
And it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents, unquote. So after a new work is added to a given tradition, the whole existing order needs to be altered and needs to be adjusted. The values of each work and their impact on each other are kind of shuffled and readjusted, right? The relations, proportions, and values of each work are kind of shifted and altered. So this is conformity.

This is a kind of dialogue between the old and the new. So this is what Eliot is arguing in 'Tradition and Individual Talent.' So the change brought by a new work is a development that abandons nothing in the process. And so it does not superannuate the older writers or the older works. So it is not an improvement,

or a kind of progression; improvement or progression are not the words we use in this case. Rather, it's a new addition. Any new writing is a new addition to the existing dialogue, to the existing repertoire, right? So, actually, Rushdie gives a very good example from Borges. We see that Jorge Luis Borges reinforces this idea of past-bound influence with the example that Franz Kafka's works,

Help the reader to better understand and discover the works by his previous authors. So Kafka enables a better discovery, understanding, and interpretation of authors who wrote before him. So the reader, for example, can discover Browning with greater sharpness after reading Kafka. So, this is something Eliot returns to when we talk of Rushdie's imaginary homelands. So, Imaginary Homelands serves as a crucial exploration of the plight of writers who are writing in the diaspora.

It vividly portrays their struggle to reconnect with their homelands, a reconnection that sometimes proves futile due to the inherent incompleteness of memory. This profound disconnection leaves them alienated from their roots. Through the use of metaphors and intertextuality, the author successfully depicts the problem of fragmented memory while also celebrating these fragments, these shards of memories. Rushdie argues that those in exile must resort to imagination to recreate the homes they have never been to or can never attain. So with this, we come to the end of our lecture today.



Let's meet for another round of discussions on another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.