

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 45

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled the novel and change. We just finished reading R. K. Narayan's novel the guide we'll start with a new novel today from this session which happened to be happens to be Chinua Achebe's novel things fall apart uh so before we begin, uh, we will just give up context in a novel this is one of the most famous novels written in the post-colonial tradition. It is in a way a rewriting of the Heart of Darkness story and I have deliberately kept these two novels in this course together because they are dialoguing with each other and also it gives a sense of how one novel can rewrite an earlier story from a different position. So, the politics of positionality is very important. we read a Achebe's novel and we'll also read uh nervous condition uh you know another great novel written in the same tradition uh but albeit from a more trauma studies perspective we'll read that in conjunction with things fall apart and the way these two novels would will emerge together hopefully the way i've designed it is how it talks about issues such as racism abuse and other kinds of traumatic conditions in the post-colonial and the colonial conditions, in the colonial cultural condition. So how these two novels are very interestingly and brilliantly representative of the very dark, depressing conditions that transpired during colonialism and how both novels are written from very interesting positions of storytelling and narrativity. Now, Achebe obviously writes Things Fall Apart, taking the title from W. B. Yeats's famous poem, The Second Coming, which contains the famous line, The center cannot hold, things fall apart, and mere anarchy is let loose upon the world, lines which may be familiar to most of you over here. But again, the idea of centerlessness is absolutely crucial to this particular novel, because, you know, what it is,

among many things, is the politics of erasure, and how violence operates at both physical as well as psychological levels and how the production of centerlessness is also accompanied by a certain kind of epistemic violence. Now the way I want to locate this novel is in a trajectory with Robinson Crusoe. So if Robinson Crusoe is the beginning of the imperial narrative from a white man's perspective, *Heart of Darkness*, you know, comes to the point where that perspective begins to sort of show fault lines. So, we can see the fault lines, we can see the cracks, which are moving around the narrative and how the darkness.

Now, when we come to something like *Things Fall Apart*, we can see that from an entirely different perspective, the other side of the story, which is a story of the native, the original native. So, what happens to the land, what happens to the mind, what happens to, in other words, the matter and mind during times of psychological as well as physical violence, which can be political inequality, which can be domestic in quality as well. Now, this particular essay by Richard Begum, and this should be on the screen, it talks about the idea of history and tragedy and things fall apart. So, it is titled *Achiever's Sense of an Ending, History and Tragedy and Things Fall Apart*. So, it is a profoundly historical novel in the sense that it talks about real historical conditions. It gives a fictional representation of those conditions in very, very illustrative ways. But at the same time, it is about a human tragedy and tragedy about loss, tragedy about, you know, the erasure of identity, tragedy about physical violence and so on and so forth. Now, the way this essay situates Achebe's novel is really interesting because it brings in the politics of First World, Third World, also post-colonialism and post-modernism in terms of how one can read this novel through different theoretical and interpretative lenses, okay. So, let's dive into the essay and see what this is all about. So, this is on your screen, Richard Begum's essay, *Achebe's Sense of an Ending, History and Tragedy and Things Fall Apart*. One of the most notable consequences of cultural globalization has been the exchange that has occurred over the last decade or so between what we have come to call postmodernism and postcolonialism. Now, these two are the two big ways in which novel readings, literary readings, literary studies emerge in a post-1960s scenario. And the dialogue, the traffic between postmodernism and post-modernism is absolutely crucial when it comes to studying contemporary novels. So, this

meeting of first world and third world has inspired more controversy than consensus. But on one point it seems to have been wide agreement.

If we want to understand colonialism then we must understand how it is represented. So, at the core of understanding colonialism is an understanding or an engagement with the politics of representation as in who is doing the representing, what is being represented, what is being amplified and foregrounded and what are the things which are getting pushed into the background, erased, right, not getting encoded, in other words. As Hayden White has argued, speaking of historiography in general, the form is a content, and this means that the language, vocabulary, and conceptual framework in which the experience of colonialism is produced, inevitably determine what can and cannot be said about it. So, it is a very important point. The form is a content, as in the manner in which a story is told often influence the matter of the story. So, how you tell the story depends or determines the what of the story. So, the how obviously here includes language, vocabulary, conceptual framework and one can also add knowledge framework, cognitive framework and all those will come together to determine the nature of the story, what kind of story is being told, what can be said, what can be included and what cannot be included in such storytelling practices. To borrow Homi K. Bhabha's formulation, nation and narration are not easily separated. The one implies the other, right.

So, this really interesting traffic between nation and narration is important over here and one implies the other. One is contained within the other and both are sort of instruments of textuality, instruments of narrativity in many ways, nation and narration, right. both require strategic storytelling, both require situated storytelling, right? So, who is doing the storytelling and where is the storyteller situated? So, all these questions become really, really important. Now, we come to the objectives of this particular essay. The present paper explores the intersection between narrative construction and colonial representation by focusing on an aspect of literary form that has received little attention in post-colonial studies, namely the question of closure or ending. Now, we just spent a lot of time, if you remember, talking about the lack of closure in R. K. Narayan's guide, as in, you know, the reason why Narayan keeps the ending so deliberately ambivalent and open-ended is

because he wants readers to continue to read the story in different ways where we can never be sure whether Raju, the sort of character in Narayan's story actually acquires a spiritual strength in terms of bringing in rain or is he just doing one more con job. So that is deliberately left unanswered. So, it is very, very non-closure in that sense. So, the closure quality is deliberately avoided. The question of closure becomes absolutely crucial when it comes to representation because what do you choose to end your representation with or end your representation in, these become political questions as well as artistic questions. So, the closure and ending in post-colonial studies surprisingly and sadly has received little attention and this particular essay by Richard Begum seeks to address that absence by using, you know, Achebe's novel. So, yet it is certainly reasonable to assume that a literature that identifies itself as postcolonial and defines itself in terms of the aftermath of colonialism will have a passing interest in the way endings are narratively achieved. So, again, important question about achieving endings. How do you achieve endings? How do you choose to design endings, right? So, of course, that is a narrative choice.

The narrative choice as you all know by now is often always a political choice, a subjective choice. So, in what they mean and how they are fashioned, so the fashioning of endings, the fashioning of closures and again non-closure is also a way to end the story as we see in the case of Narayan. of particular interest in this regard is a highly problematic relation that post-colonial literature has to its own past and more specifically to the writings of its own history. So, the rewriting of history and how does post-colonial literature as an act of fabulation, as an act of retelling, how does it achieve it? We may begin to appreciate some of the difficulties entailed in this relation by considering a number of connected questions. First, where do post-colonial writers locate the past? Is it to be found in the colonial, pre-colonial or post-colonial period? So, I mean, where do you locate, where do you situate the past, right? So, do you go back in time? Do we locate it in the colonial moment? or do you locate it in the post-colonial moment, right? So, the idea of location, the politics of location becomes very, very important because that is the, so you design the genesis, you design the zero point from which a story can start. So, the choice of the starting point becomes a strategic choice. Second, can we neatly separate the different historical strands that traverse and intersect these various epochs? So, the intersectionality becomes an important point

because the whole idea of starting, the whole idea of storytelling, so all these become important and also the colonial, pre-colonial, post-colonial intersections become important as well. Can we confidently assign to them decisive beginnings and conclusive endings? Third, what historical stance should post-colonial writers assume towards their own history, especially if they wish to forge a sense of national identity after colonization? To what extent does critical history of that sort described by Nietzsche become a luxury that a post-colonial writer cannot afford, right? So, all these are really interesting questions, but, you know, we can see. The important issue over here is the issue of identity, history and storytelling. That's the triangulation, history, identity and storytelling. So how do you fabulate history? How do you design history? And how does that design determine the sense of identity that you want to create to move forward in time, to move ahead in time? In examining these questions, I want to take up the case of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* because as an exercise in historical recuperation, it is ancestrally concerned with issues of formal shaping and narrative closure, right.

So again, the idea of the form and the narrative, the story become important. And because it's a story about recuperation, about redressing the damages done, it becomes important for us to study the closure. How does a novel end? And also, how does it sort of get shaped at a formal level? Of course, at first glance, the novel appears to have a perfectly transparent narrative line. It tells a story, a tragic story of Okonkwo's rise and fall among the Igbo people, Okonkwo being the protagonist, Igbo as the community described, concluding with that least ambiguous of all endings, the death of the hero, right. So, on the surface, it is the most unambiguous the most straightforward ending, the hero dies. So, what could be mysterious or complex about it? And that's what the essay tries to find out. With only a few exceptions, critics have understood the novel in precisely these terms, seeing its closing pages as entirely unproblematic. Yet any straightforward reading of Achebe's ending must reconcile itself with the fact that a novel describes a situation of profound cultural entropy, a very, very important concept that I will spend some time in doing. Cultural entropy, the sort of the de-energizing culture or the de-energization of culture, the decadence of a culture, the sort of the slow death of a culture. Cultural entropy, a society in which the norms of conduct and institutions of governance are in the process of falling apart. So, this

is where we can see how the title begins to make a lot of sense. Things are falling apart the centre cannot hold. And that is a classic definition of entropy, the decadence of the level of energy. Now what is more, while the Chavis novel movingly elegizes the passing away of traditional Igbo culture, the long view it adopts, looking ahead to the future establishment of Nigeria suggests that Achebe's own position on the modernization of Africa is, at the very least, complicated. Now, this is a very old debate in postcolonial studies.

So is development necessarily a subversive progressive function or is development also collusive with the agents of imperialism, right. Because it is defined in those terms, it is defined with that vocabulary, it is defined using those lenses, it is defined using those yardsticks and benchmarks. So, in that sense it is profoundly and very closely collusive with the agents of and the engines of imperialism, right. So is it really a development in terms of liberation, okay. And, you know, Achebe's own position apropos of the quote unquote modernization of Africa, again, a very problematic term, his own position is quite complicated, right? So, he doesn't quite subscribe to modernization in the Western sense. At the same time, there was also a sense of separation from the earlier templates of values. Given the subject of Achebe's novel and his own divided response to it, we would expect a fairly open-ended conclusion, one that acknowledges his own closure as tentative, even contingent. In what follows, I will argue that *Things Fall Apart* resists the idea of a single or simple resolution by providing three distinct endings, three different ways of reading the events that conclude the novel, right. So when we say, when the writer on this essay says three different endings, what it means essentially is three different ways in which the endings can be read in terms of creating a sense of inconclusivity. a sense of ambiguity, which sort of belies the superficial straightforward sense of the novel ending with the hero's death.

At the same time, I will relate these endings to three different conceptions of history, especially as it is produced within a post-colonial context, right. So the different conceptions of history in a way it connects to identity iteration, in a way it connects to cultural preoccupations. Those things are also elaborated and expanded in these readings. First, Achebe writes a form of nationalist history. Here the interest is essentially a

reconstructive and centers on recovering an Igbo past that has been neglected or suppressed by historians who would not or could not write from an African perspective.

As Achebe observed in 1964, four years after Nigerian independence, historians everywhere are rewriting the stories of the new nations, replacing short, gobbled, despised history with a more sympathetic account. Now, sympathy over here becomes important as does empathy, because what novels achieve and what history books sometimes can't, is in terms of delivering a moving story of the past, a story which moves you in terms of moving across space and time, but also moving experientially, gives you an effective engagement with what happened. Hence sympathy and empathy, all these different sentimental structures really come in. So nationalist history tends to emphasize what other histories have either glossed over or flatly denied, namely that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless, but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, for they had poetry and above all, they had dignity, right? So, there is that, this is what I meant when we started reading this essay the politics of erasure. So, when we read history books, when the politics of historiography is operative, what we see is an interplay of encoding and erasure, as in there are certain bits which are encoded, amplified, foregrounded, represented again and again with a lot of cultural capital.

And there are also bits which are conveniently erased away, not represented, underrepresented or marginalized in their representations. The dignity, the poetry, the civilizational dignity of the non-white person often gets erased. Secondly, Achebe writes a form of adversarial history, so history from the adversary position. See the idea of the opponent, the protagonist who belongs to the other territory is writing the history. Here the emphasis falls not on the reconstruction of an authentic past that has been lost, but on the deconstruction of a counterfeit pass that has been imposed. So, the idea of counterfeit pass becomes important. The idea of a fake pass becomes important. the emphasis not so much in reconstructing a pure past that has gone forever but you know since the recovering a past from the bogus narratives, from the fake narratives of inferiority that have been imposed through you know different kinds of fashioning, epistemic fashioning, right. So, a wrong

history which has been given to a certain community, a wrong history which has been you know yoked to a certain community and its identity that has to be fractured and deconstructed. That also becomes, that sometimes becomes a bigger agenda of the post-colonial rewriting process. So, adversarial history enables Achebe to write against what he himself has called a colonialist discourse, against the attitudes and assumptions, the language and rhetoric that characterize British colonial rule in Nigeria, right? So again, there's a state of anti-authority, anti-imperialism stance that Achebe takes obviously writing against the British tradition and the choice of a novel again we discussed this in Narayan how the novel it gives a really interesting insider's critique because the form of the novel is from the Western tradition but writers like Narayan and Achebe, they use the form to infuse a different kind of content which is subversive in quality. So, third, Achebe writes the form of meta-history, so history about history, meta-history. This kind of history calls attention to itself as a piece of writing, a narrative construction that depends on principles of selection. What material will be included? Emphasis. What importance will be attached to it? And shaping.

How will it be organized and arranged? Now if you look at these three questions, What material will be included? So that's the politics of inclusivity. Will it be inclusive? Will it include the really important voices? And will there be certain voices which will be kept away because they problematize a certain kind of designed history? The next question is emphasis. What importance will be attached to it? So, what will be foregrounded and what will be pushed in the background? So, the politics of emphasis, the politics of privatization. Lastly, shaping. How will it be organized and arranged? So, what kind of sequencing will take place? What kind of an emplotment will take place? Now, what I want to arrive at here using the vocabulary that Begum is using is look at the relationship in encoding and emplotment right so what do you encode in terms of memory history etc and then of course when it comes to textualizing it how do you emplot it right so what how do you design the plot how do you sort of manicure the plot in such a way as the bits that you want to encode gets forward in time and the bits that you want to exclude get you know pushed in the background Yet, things fall apart as concerned not only with writing history, but also with fashioning tragedy. So, the entire idea of fashioning a certain kind of tragedy, which is

obviously from a certain historical position, but also a tragedy in a very affective, subjective sense. Achebe himself made this point in an interview with Robert Sirumaga, in which he discussed the political implications of tragedy and explicitly referred to this novel as an example of that genre. So a political history, a political tragedy, which is also something that *Things Fall Apart* is. And Achebe seems to take the authorial position on this as well, as aligned to what we're reading here. A good deal of the critical literature has focused on this issue, addressing the question of whether a novel is indeed a tragedy and, if so, what kind of tragedy.

So again, these are the benchmarks used in a Western tradition. Now Achebe is writing from a non-Western tradition. The form is Western, the form is the *Dove* novel, but he's writing a non-white story. So, all these questions about classification, nomenclature, these become unimportant and quite difficult to respond to. Thus, Bruce Macdonald and Margaret Turner maintain. *Things fall apart* fails to an Aristotelian tragedy. Alison Naveen asserts it succeeds as modern tragedy, where Afam Ebegu treats it as an example of Igbo tragedy, and Abela Arrail considers it more generally as an instance of cultural and historical tragedy. Now, we see all these different people, Macdonald and Turner, you know describing how the novel of Achebe fails to become an Aristotelian tragedy in the Aristotelian definition in that sense. While others have said it is an Igbo tragedy and very specific to the Igbo community and there are other critics even in the end who say well this is an example of a universal tragedy across cultures, across human history. So different readings, different valid readings are equally articulated and accommodated and that is the beauty and the complexity of the story. *Things Fall Apart* It will be my contention that much of the disagreement over generic classification has resulted from the failure to identify Achebe's multi-perspectival approach to the problem, a failure to recognise that he has written three distinct endings. So, we stop at this point today because what is important is for us to understand, even despite the fact that it has a superficially closure-oriented ending, this also offers you multiple endings, right? Multiple ways to interpret the novel and take away the ending based on what you subjectively situate yourself to. So, we can see how even the first few pages of the essay, and we'll start skipping a little bit and get the main bit of the novel, but what we can see is there is a sense of post-modernism meeting

post-colonialism happening and things fall apart. An important thing for here is the idea to sort of realize that the ending, the end of the Jabez Marvel is a very deceptively straightforward ending and we need to be a better reader, a more competent reader for us to decode what really is going on, the level of ending, the level of the climax and the story. So, we will stop at this point and we continue with the reading of Things Fall Apart in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.