

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 46

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 2

So, hi and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue reading Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart. We have already had one session on the novel already and we'll just pick up from where we left off last time. So if you remember, just to give you a very quick recap of what we've done so far. are looking at this novel by Achebe as a rewriting of history, true fabulation, true fiction. But at the same time, it is also something of a positioning. It is also fashioning a certain kind of tragedy, right, positioning a certain kind of tragedy, because the positionality of tragedy is important. Because if you just remember, the Heart of Darkness story by Conrad, the entire tragedy, the entire tragic impetus, the entire tragic weight is located in the white person, the white subject, the white male subject, right. Everyone else outside the white male subjectivity territory is denied any tragic sense, is denied any tragic identity, right. So, the positionality and the fashioning of tragedy is also important over here because then who gets to be the tragic subject? That becomes an important question. Who gets to tell the tragic tale? Who gets to inhabit and embody tragedy? These things become these questions become very important in any fashioning of tragedy. So, in that sense, the Achebe novel is a refashioning of the post-colonial tragedy. So, this is on your screen and obviously reading Begum's essay. Things Fall Apart is concerned not only with the writing history but also with fashioning history. Achebe himself made this point in an interview with Robert Saramaga in which he discussed the political implications of tragedy and explicitly referred to his novel as an example of that Genre, right, as a political tragedy, a post-colonial tragedy or a refashioned tragedy.

And if you remember, again, when we started off reading this essay, the main intellectual impetus of the essay is to locate the ending, the idea of the non-straightforward ending of a Achebe's novel, despite a superficial straightforwardness where the protagonist dies. This essay has turned a probe into the many possibilities with which the novel's ending may be discussed. 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. Thus, Bruce MacDonald and Margaret Turner maintain that *Things Fall Apart* fails as an Aristotelian tragedy. So, we discussed this earlier, how this fails as an Aristotelian tragedy, how it is a modern tragedy, how it can be seen as a tragedy of the Igbo community and so on and so forth. And of course, as you can see on the screen, Abiola Aireel considers this more generally as an instance of cultural and historical tragedy. So this, what Begum is arguing over here that the reason why there are so many differences in terms of addressing the kind of tragedy it is, is because most criticism, most scholarship has failed to recognize the multiplicity in Achebe's novel where which is why the sort of the straightforward ending is celebrated as something very innocuous and very closure driven whereas the ending if one may read, if one may read it deeply is something more problematic in that sense, right. And as Begum goes on to say that, according to the model that I shall develop, nationalist history is associated with classical or Aristotelian tragedy. Adversarial history is associated with modern or ironic tragedy. So, there are two different kinds of tragedy that are defined and meta-history is associated with critical discourse. So, in a very, very broadly speaking, these are three engines of tragic writing or tragedy writing or textualizing tragedy, if you will. which are operative. So, the Aristotelian tragedy is more involved with nationalist history, history of the status quo or classical history, whether it is orientation and continuity in terms of space and time and identity. Whereas when you have an adversarial tragedy written from the other perspective, then it is more ironic in quality where the fault lines, the incompletions, the interruptions these are foregrounded and sometimes celebrated. And of course, we have the meta history idea of tragedy which is associated with a critical discourse as in it is critiquing the own process of history writing as it were by laying bare the mechanism which is involved in the history writing process.

So, my larger purpose in pursuing this line of analysis is to suggest that *Things Fall Apart* demands what is in effect a palimpsestic reading, so multi-layered reading, palimpsestic reading, a kind of historical and generic archaeology which is designed to uncover layer by layer those experiences that have accreted around colonialism and its protracted aftermath. So, both during colonialism and the legacies, the post-colonial moment, the aftermath of colonialism. Which is why the layer-by-layer quality is important because it requires various kinds of unpacking, various kinds of uncovering, right, which is why this particular essay is a challenge to the standard scholarship on *Things Fall Apart*, right. So, it reads the novel as a multi-layered novel and it sort of brings in the conflict, sort of a triangulated conflict between Aristotelian tragedy, adversarial tragedy and meta history, right. So, all these different processes of history writing are brought into a very, very productive paradox apropos of each other. So, the first of the novel's three endings centre on Okonkwo's killing of the messenger, his failed attempt to rouse his people to action and his subsequent suicide. This ending presents the events of the novel largely from an African perspective, equating Okonkwo's demise with the collapse of Igbo culture. So, it's quite allegorical. So, the demise of Okonkwo is also the end of the Igbo culture.

So, he becomes some kind of an allegorical embodiment of that culture per se. The idea that Okonkwo is a great man whose destiny is linked with that of his people is immediately established in the novel's celebrated opening, and this is the opening of the novel. Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of 18, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. Amalinze was a great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Me'eno. He was called the cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Auchinkew threw in a fight in which the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of the town engaged the spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. So again, look at the very interesting juxtaposition of historical, topical description with fabulation, with apocryphal descriptions and with embellishments and with different kinds of hyperbolic representations. So different orders of space-time, different orders of measurement, different orders of scale juxtaposed

together, sometimes compared, sometimes contrasted, sometimes calibrated together, right. Now Okonkwo is described through his, you know, physical prowess, the fact that he could defeat the earlier champion who hadn't been defeated for the longest time. And you can see the digression method, the almost meta-leptic method through which different kinds of characterizations are happening, different kinds of plot, emplotment are taking place. And as it is very, very evident in this passage, history recedes into myth as a narrator presents the seven-year reign of Amalinze and the seven-day struggle of the founder of the village in epic terms. So again, notice how the vocabulary juxtaposes the novelistic tradition as well as the earlier pre-novelistic tradition, in this case, the epic tradition.

So, we discuss something similar when we are reading R. k. narayan's guide. So how it is very heavily plucked into the real and the now in terms of novelistic tradition but at the same time it is also sort of recreating or reconstructing and recycling definitely some of the mythical structures or the mythical vocabulary that Narayan is obviously well aware of corresponding to the Hindu Indian myths, right. So that juxtaposition is very, very important for us to recognize. The passage also serves both to connect Okonkwo with the beginnings of human fear. Through his wrestling exploits, he is compared with the village's symbolic progenitor. So, the genesis story is subverted and Okonkwo becomes the new genesis embodiment. And to look forward to his own and his people's end, the spirit of the wild represented in nature will be replaced by the more powerful alien force of British imperialism. So again, the mutability and cyclicity of power. So, how the spirit of the wild which is now the most powerful spirit will be replaced, will be supplanted, will be erased by the engines of imperialism which will come in very, very soon. So, in a few death strokes, Achebe illustrates how Okonkwo has come to personify the destiny of his community, extending from his earliest origins to its final destruction, right. So, again the sense of finality is important over here and of course the finality is connected, connects both individual and the community together. almost an apocalyptic quality there at the beginning in terms of how Okonkwo is represented, described through his village, through his community, which is also to suggest that the death of Okonkwo or the demise of Okonkwo, the end of Okonkwo will also indicate the end of an era, the end of a space-time, the end of a community consciousness as it were. The larger effect of Achebe's opening is

to establish Okonkwo as a particular kind of tragic protagonist, the great warrior who carries with him the fate of his people. Seen from the standpoint of the first ending, he is, as Michael Valls Moses has argued, a Homeric hero cast in a distinctly Achelean mould. So, again, notice how the European tradition, the Western traditions of characterizing the hero, of creating the character of the hero are still present. It is possible to read Okonkwo from those lenses. while at the same time he is obviously someone who is subverting those lenses. He is subverting through his physical embodiment as well as his persona and the kind of community representation he is doing.

He is subverting and rewriting that fashioning of the hero, right. And we can see how this kind of fashioning may be seen. And this is a quotation by Michael Fools. Like a chieftain, Okonkwo is a man of action, a man of war. His fame among the Igbo rests on solid personal achievements, foremost of which are his exploits as the greatest wrestler and most accomplished warrior of the nine villages. He is a man renowned and respected for having brought home the battle five human heads, and on feast days and important public occasions, he drinks his palm wine from the skull of the first warrior he killed. So, I mean these are the kind of markers of masculinity, virile, military, you know powerful masculinity that you know is obviously corresponds to the community, the identity of the community. And Okonkwo as a hero of the community, as the most powerful man of the community is described using certain strategic markers. So again we can see how the text and the context are connected with each other because when we talk about novel and change it is important to also study characters and we saw how Raju's character in R. K. Narayan's novel is symbolic of the different kinds of changes in the ecosystem, the moral, financial, you know cultural ecosystem around him and his transition is reflective of that changing ecosystems in that sense it becomes a classic novel and change Now, here too, we have a similar situation. See, Okonkwo is, in other words, identified with his community to the extent that it esteems the martial ethos he embodies. And while his village certainly does more than make war, it especially prizes those men who win distinction on the battlefield. So, in Umufea, men were bold and warlike. This is not to say, however, that Okonkwo epitomizes all the virtues of Igbo culture or that he is himself without fault.

So, there is, he is a flawed hero. In other words, he is not someone who is elevated to a deified position. So, that humour-like quality with Okonkwo, those of you who read the novel would know, is exactly what makes him so memorable in quality. So, Achebe, on the contrary, himself understands that within an Aristotelian framework, his hero is necessarily a flawed character, guilty of errors in judgment, guilty to use the Greek term of hamartia. So, hamartia is a fatal error in judgment which contributes to the hero's downfall. So, we see that happen in many novels how novels which still use the sort of Greek tragic vocabulary often uses tropes of hamartia, peripatias, change in fortune and of course, you know the decline of the hero happens because of that, right. Hubris is another example of vanity, false pride which causes the error of judgment. As Achebe has observed in an interview with Charles Rowell, the tragic protagonist is a man who is larger than life, who exemplifies virtues that are admired by the community, but also a man who, for all that, is still human. He can have flaws, you see, but all that seems to be very elegantly underlined in Aristotle's work. Obviously, Okonkwo is larger than life. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose give him a very severe look. Here these happy proportions are carries a figurative as well as a literal significance. So, the larger-than-life character of Okonkwo, the physical dimensionality of Okonkwo also carries within him you know the allegorical dimension, the fact that he represents the community which is flourishing and big and expensive. So, his fall in the end, his death and demise in the end is also a very, very heavy death of the entire community of you know it is the end of an era so to speak.

So, it is important to make him larger than life both in terms of his valour, character as well as his sheer physical presence. So, they indicate the difficulty he experiences fitting within the boundaries of any social order. So it is that, that as a man of action, a great athlete and warrior, he is excessive both in his high spiritedness, what the Greeks called thymos. So, whenever he was angry, he could not and could not get his words out quickly enough he would use his fists. So, again, a very physical way to describe him. And it is prideful arrogance, what the Greeks call hybris. So, you know, again, vanity or false pride. The oldest man, the president, said sternly to Okonkwo, that those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble, right? So, the

lack of humility is a problem that Okonkwo has. Of course, all these character flaws, which are interestingly and ironically, very, very similar and comparable to the Greek characters is, are what makes Okonkwo, what make Okonkwo very memorable as a human character. Indeed, like many of the heroes of classical tragedy, Okonkwo's immoderate behaviour consistently places him at cross-purposes, not merely with his fellow Umuofians, but with the gods themselves. So, Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess. And it comes as no surprise when in the second part of the novel he is sent into temporary exile for offending Annie, the Earth deity, right. So, we can see how anger, lack of humility, arrogance, so all these characters, all these qualities are also part of Okonkwo's character, right and that is what makes him really interesting, the largeness of him, the bigness of him and also the sort of fatality about him, the fact that he is someone who seems to be doomed already for destruction. So, all these come together and make him a really round character. And one has to remember that he is representing a culture, so he should not be just an allegorical function.

So, the flawed qualities of Okonkwo also correspond to the flawed qualities of the Igbo culture in many senses. Nevertheless, if we are to appreciate the tragedy of the first ending, something that Achebe clearly intends, then we must recognize that Okonkwo's faults are essentially virtues carried to an extreme, and that while he is obviously not perfect, he nevertheless represents some of the best qualities of his culture. As Obereka remarks near the novel's end, that man was one of the greatest men in Omafe. The heroic quality of Okonkwo is also quite Hellenic in the sense that you know even his flaws are representative of his culture. Even his flawed quality makes him you know someone more memorable and great. So, his greatness not only depends on his nobility or his goodness but also his flawed quality, also his fatal flaws in many senses. So, in that in that way the novel becomes a really interesting piece of imagination. And even if you read the novel psychologically, you find that Okonkwo is a very psychologically complex character, but also being a function, some kind of social, cultural, political impetus at that point of time. The crisis of the novel, so every novel has a series of crisis and in this particular novel obviously it has a political, geopolitical, cultural, psychological, different palimpsestic layers of crisis

which are there. So, the crisis of the novel comes in the penultimate chapter when an impudent messenger sent by the colonial authorities orders a tribal meeting to disband.

Okonkwo the warrior is moved to action. In a flash, Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body. So, the act of beheading that happens over here is obviously quite clinical. At the same time, it is a very spectacular depiction of Okonkwo's prowess and strength and valour. So, the waiting back cloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Omofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messenger escape. They had broken in the tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in the tumult. He heard voices asking, why did you do it? He whipped his machete on the sand and went away. So, silence over here is important because there is this commotion, the chaos and murmur which is getting generated which is also an indication of the disbelief and the misgivings of his community and Okonkwo stands as a lone man over here, the certain but lone man who is certain of his action, is certain of the rightness of his action and he walks away in silence as well. So that becomes a very symbolic departure. which is also a moment of crisis and that it happens to a lot of heroes in novels and cinema and you find that it is very old trope, the isolation, the increased isolation of the protagonist who is about to become a hero or who has become a hero and whose life is about to end. So, that sense of isolation is also you know part of his individuality or uniqueness per se. The scene is represented or presented with a devastating simplicity. From the perspective of this first ending, the people of Umuofia have deserted Okonkwo, and in the process betrayed themselves. But the wiping of the machete is the only eloquence he permits himself. It is an ordinary and everyday gesture, yet in the present context it acquires special significance. Okonkwo remains true to the martial ethos that his people have abandoned. Here, represented by the various care of his weapon, at the same time, he symbolically dissolves his connection with his people, wiping away the blood bond that has joined them. So, this is a really brilliant reading, as you can see. So, the simple act of wiping away the blood from the machete can be read in so many ways.

One reading obviously is he stands true to his character. He stands as a pure military man who is refusing to give in to the confusion and the misgivings of his community. That is one reading which makes him a pure noble hero of the military kind. The second reading is just the opposite of that you know in dissolving the connection with people, you know, he is doing that by wiping away the blood, the blood bond, the kinship system that had earlier connected them together. So, when he wipes it away from his machete, he becomes someone who is abandoned by the community, right. So, both readings are equally valid and equally accommodated in this palimpsestic postcolonial reading that we are doing with the novel. So, this gesture especially resonant because as critics have pointed out in killing the messenger he is shedding the blood of a fellow Igbo, right. So, this becomes almost an act of sin and he sheds the blood of the fellow Igbo and then obviously the wiping away of blood from this machete also becomes some kind of a rejection of the kinship structure. So, the suicide that follows is itself a profound violation of Igbo law which strictly prohibits acts of self-destruction, right. So, suicide is a big taboo in this culture, the Igbo culture which forbids it in no unclear terms and yet you know that becomes a very important part of the novel which is also to say how the act of suicide is a further rejection of the Igbo legal system, the Igbo community kinship system. The question of how we should respond to Okonkwo's final deed has been examined in detail by Kali Ogbu and Damian Opatu, but with strikingly different results.

So, one of the really fun things about this essay is how it brings together absolutely different readings. of the novel and you know it puts them all together juxtaposes them all together to show the well they are different from each other they sort of undercut each other but the novel's greatness is such that it can all be accommodated and they can all be valid at different points of time So for Ogbu, the suicide grows out of Okonkwo's failure to act with sufficient piety towards the Igbo gods and traditions. So that's one way of looking at it is a guilt which grows out of his failure to be respectful to the Igbo gods and traditions. While for the other reading by Damien Lopata, it's a consequence of the Igbo's refusal to rally around Okonkwo and join him in resisting the British. So, there are different readings. One is Okonkwo kills himself out of guilt because he feels his let the Igbo community

down. The other could be, this is an act of isolation and absolute extreme loneliness because Igbo's refused to rally around Okonkwo and join him in the resistance against British, right? So, both readings are equally valid. As was the case with discussions on the novels of the novel's tragedy, the disagreement arises in the first place because the reader is difficultly establishing Achebe's position on a number of issues. Difficult in knowing for example where he stands on a question of violent resistance to the British. So again, Achebe's own authorial position here is important because he is someone who is obviously, it is unclear in terms of where he stands in the act of violent disagreements, of violent resistance against the British.

Is he advocating as a pro-violence in terms of resistance or does he want a more diplomatic relationship? That is never quite clear. So, one can obviously maintain an ambivalence around Okonkwo's death over here. Of course, this interpretative problem is, largely disappears, once you begin to read the novel palimpsestically as a layering of just diverse perspectives on history and tragedy. Now once you establish a palimpsestive model then all these seemingly contradictory readings can become equally valid instead of undercutting each other. Hence, understood within the terms of the novel's first ending, Okonkwo's suicide is a logical and necessary consequence of an idealistic and absolute disposition. Both nationalist history and heroic tragedy demand that he remains unyielding and that Igbos honour the cultural heritage by refusing assimilation. Even in his final gesture, then, Okonkwo functions as a true representative of his people. For he sees it, as he sees it, Igbo culture has willingly succumbed to its own annihilation, committing what is a form of collective suicide by submitting to the British. In taking his own life, Okonkwo has simply preceded his people in the communal destruction. Once again, he has led the way. So, this is again a very interesting reading. So, the act of suicide here, the act of killing himself over here is also seen as an act of leadership because it's a premonition of the symbolic suicide that the community creates when they refuse to resist the British. So, this sort of anticipates or becomes a very prophetic act because it anticipates the complete erasure of identity. that the Igbo community is about to experience, right. So, the annulation, the self-annulation of Okonkwo is also an indicator of the imminent annulation of the Igbo community because it is resisting, it is not resisting the British imperialism. So,

in one reading this is an absolute rejection of the Igbo community because it is going against the ethos of the preservation and the ethos against self-destruction. So, Okonkwo's suicide is a blatant, you know, refusal or the blatant rejection of the Igbo community's injunction against suicide. He blatantly disregards it and kills himself. That is one reading. The second reading is, you know, he is someone, as a leader, he just kills himself because he realizes it is just a matter of time that his entire community gets psychologically killed. It completely, you know, his identity is erased away in no unclear terms, right. So that in that he becomes to, so he begins to anticipate what is to come and he becomes sort of the seer, you know, someone who gets there first, someone who leads the way, the leader as it were. So, we stop at this point today but we can see how the novel does two things primarily in very interesting ways that one is it gives you an allegorical structure in terms of how the society is changing, how the geopolitics, the change in geopolitics is also changing different kinds of identity formations, societal form for, you know, formations, landscape formations, and different kinds of demographic formations. But at the same time, it's also a very subjective psychological novel, which talks about a person and his psyche, the trials and tribulations, emotional and moral ambivalence and ambiguity, that a person goes through, that the protagonist goes through. So, it is both quite psychological and very, very political, which is why it is one of the really important novels to read in a course like this.

And of course, in its own right, it is one of the most famous novels written in the 20th century, *Things Fall Apart*. And in many senses, this could be said as one of the first examples of a proper postcolonial novel, because it talks about the colonial moment and what it does, the level of economic corruption, the level of physical corruption and abuse. But also, very importantly at the level of psychological corruption, how the psyche of a community is absolutely decimated and the erasure over here is not just a physical erasure of people dying but also the erasure and the denial of a community's history, a community's identity, a community's starting story. So, the stories are taken away, the identities are taken away and what we get instead is an implantation. a cohesive implantation of a new identity iteration which is an imperial identity, right. So, we can see how different forms of equation, physiological, sort of physical, psychological, emotional, visceral, military, financial, all different forms of question and territorialization are taking place over here.

And Okonkwo as a character he is constantly navigating across different kinds of you know domination, different kinds of tyranny and his eventual suicide becomes an act of liberation in some sense is one reading that that is the only resistance left for him at that point of time which also anticipates as the reading does over here the eventual and imminent death of the Igbo community right. So, the community, identity and politics all get triangulated together in very, very complex ways in the novel. So, we'll stop at this point today and we'll continue with this reading in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.