

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 47

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 3

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We are looking at Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart. We have already had a couple of sessions on this novel. We'll just continue reading the Richard Begum's essay that we are studying in some details now now if you remember this essay which should be on the screen it talks about the different endings in a Achebe's novel and how each ending corresponds to a different interpretative register right and how obviously the novel is a retelling of history in many ways and the two strands of history that Begum talks about, one is a nationalist discourse of history, the other is the adversarial mode of history and in this particular section we will talk about how the second ending of Achebe's novel corresponds to the adversarial history and the way it is sort of representing true subversion. So, this should be on your screen. The novel's second ending, which I associate with adversarial history, views events from the heavily ironized perspective of the district commissioner. Now irony, as you all know, is a very interesting narrative mode where it talks about certain things. It represents through indirectness. It represents through obliqueness. He represents sometimes the comedy and there is always a sense of subversion, which is associated with irony. There's a semantic slipperiness that irony is capable of creating, which is why you find that many retellings, many reconstructions and many revisionist narratives rely on irony as a very, very staple device of representation. And Achebe's novel also uses irony to a large extent. It's very successfully, one would argue. So Igbo culture is now presented not from the inside as vital and autonomous, but from the outside as an object of

anthropological curiosity. And its collapse is understood not as an African tragedy, but as a European triumph.

So, the focal points are now just reversed. irony also obviously represents or depends on the focal position or focalization. What is the focal point which is being espoused? And the district commissioner in this particular case is obviously the European, the outsider. So, the story is also focalized to the lens of the outsider which takes a very different currency, a very different value system altogether because the entire novel then may be read as an example of European triumph, as the end of the resistance, the end of any indigenous iteration and the beginning, the consolidation of the European territorialization. So entire valencies get switched and swamped, right, which is obviously a very interesting point. And the other important point over here is the phrase anthropological curiosity, the object of anthropological curiosity. Now you'll notice there's a degree of reification happening over here, what we call epistemic reification, or reification of the level of knowledge, where knowledge is used as some kind of an instrument through which human subjects, human rituals, societal rituals, they're all objectified. commodified and sort of frozen and fossilized. And this fossilization of human objects and human subjects is a very, very staple method of imperialism where everything is classified and commodified and sort of itemized in a very, very instrumental quantifiable way. So, the quantifiability of knowledge, the quantifiability and classification of the human systems, social systems, human behaviors were also part of the cartographic project, the map making project of imperialism.

So, the object of anthropological curiosity here also serves in very close collusion with the cartographic classifications which were obviously a big part, a vital part one would argue of imperialism, the entire imperial engine that required, that depended on classification, reification, map making in different ways. So, you know the maps obviously were a very important part a very important epistemic instrument through which territories could be known, classified and shared. Knowledge of territory, knowledge of people, knowledge of customs are shared. And all these, sort of, shareable, classified, knowledge, were also part of the coercive instrument of imperialism through which you know, more and more

powerful forms of consolidation or epistemic territorialization could take place. So, the entire thing is now sort of represented from a different focal position, right? And that focal position, the switch of the focal position is very important, which is why it is seen as a different kind of ending from the viewpoint of the European outsider. And, obviously there's a lot of irony going on over here because it's written by an insider, you know, Achebe being a writer from the continent. As the final scene of the novel unfolds, the Igbos take the district commissioner to the place where the suicide was committed. So, the suicide of the protagonist, obviously we talked about how that can be seen as an act of resistance, at the same time an act of submission, and that ambivalence, that open-endedness is part of the beauty and the artistic legacy of this novel. And then we have this quotation, this passage on your screen. Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.

Perhaps your men can help us bring down and bury him, said Obereka. We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but there may be a long time coming. The district commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs. Why can't you take him down yourselves? He asked. It's against our custom, said one of them. It's an abomination for a man to take his own life. Now, look at the change over here. from the position of authoritative administrator, he is becoming a student of primitive custom which is why the object of anthropological curiosity that phrase is so important because obviously that that epistemic you know sight line or view line is part of the administrative machinery. The fact that he has his anthropological curiosity whereby he can commodify, objectify and reify rituals is also part of the administrative authority because knowledge production, knowledge preservation and knowledge mapping was also a very vital part of the entire imperial administration. So, you can see the collusion of power and knowledge going on over here, right. So, he is suddenly becoming a student of primitive customs and he wants to know, he has all these curious questions and obviously these questions will be coded and different administrative rituals passed on to subsequent generations of administrators so that this particular territory can be controlled better. So again, knowledge over here becomes

coercive, knowledge over here becomes collusive with power and control. Now, what is particularly noteworthy in this episode is the way the District Commissioner effortlessly shifts from the resolute administrator to the student of primitive customs. Here, Achebe demonstrates that within a colonial context, the Foucauldian power paradigm and power-knowledge nexus is much more than a speculative theory.

So, we have the direct representation of the Foucauldian power-knowledge paradigm. It's just happening. It's something which is out there as a real proxy, not as a theoretical text. So, it is an inescapable and omnipresent reality. It's part of the lived reality, it's part of the administrative reality, it's part of the power reality in the colonial context zone, the Foucauldian power knowledge entanglement. Thus, those who write historical and anthropological accounts of the Igbos were typically either representatives of the British government or the semi-official guests. And the colonial administration not only helped to enable such research by opening up various regions, but also relied upon it in determining local policy. So again, we can see how this curiosity about local policy, this curiosity about customs is obviously very close to the entire power knowledge paradigm. So, the more you know, the more you map knowledge, the more you record and classify and itemize knowledge, the better it is for subsequent generations of administrators. So, this whole thing becomes one kind of a colonial archive project, right? And of course, archive, as you all know, is a very, very contested territory. It's a very political territory. It's a political space of privileged knowledge, classified knowledge, right? So, the classification of customs over here is part of the knowledge gathering mechanism, which is in turn part of the epistemic control that imperialism relies on very, very heavily. Now, the other important thing over here is who is doing the knowledge gathering. Obviously, it is the British administrators or the semi-official guests. So, what this also shows is that how history writing or how anthropology as a discourse, as a textual discourse, is almost always controlled by a certain privileged focal position.

So, the semi-official guests, the administrators of the government, they are the ones who are collecting knowledge, they are the ones who are classifying knowledge. So, the entire textualization of knowledge happening over here is itself part of a political practice, a

practice which guarantees and consolidates authority, consolidates power, consolidates all kinds of coercive mechanisms. Now, this is important because now we are talking about how power operates through knowledge, power operates through text, power operates through how you can classify different forms of discourses, right. So, the discursive quality, discursive design of power here operates through knowledge gathering, right. And again, the focal point of history writing is important as in who is writing the history that becomes the really vital question. The situatedness of the story, the location of the story, okay. So, in the case of Igbo land, the earliest anthropological studies were written by P. Amory Talbot, himself a district commissioner. So, if you look at the history of Nigeria, Igbo land, you find that the earliest anthropologists were people who are obviously positioned as district commissioner, people who are in the payroll of the empire, the empire engines. And GT Basden a missionary whose safety and well-being literally depended on the colonial office. So again, these are people who were the earliest historians, the earliest anthropologists who were writing in this tradition, and they are very much a part of the colonial machinery, their livelihood, their well-being dependent on the entire imperial engine. So obviously that goes to show the colonial bias, the imperial and epistemic bias which were there in that kind of classification. As Robert M. Wren has shown, both Talbot and Basden were, by the standards of the day, sympathetic observers of the Igbos. Indeed, the latter was a personal friend of Achebe's father.

But this is interesting because, you know, Basden was also connected to Achebe because of his friendship with Achebe's father. So, there is some interesting kinship which emerges. But this did not prevent them, did not prevent them from expressing their, in their published writings, typically European attitudes towards the Africans, right? So, the very Eurocentric prism, the very white man prism that was used over here was inescapable. So, despite the kinship, despite the friendliness, despite the sympathy, with the Igbos and people around them, you know, the way they textualize knowledge, the way they itemize the knowledge, the way they map the knowledge for subsequent generation had very clearly a very Eurocentric bias. So, the color was very Eurocentric. The focal point was very Eurocentric. And that, what this means at a very macro level, is innate structural and functional Eurocentricity of epistemic classification in the colonial contact zone, right. So, the way

the knowledge was gathered, compiled, classified, circulated, it all had a very Eurocentric quality to it, a very Eurocentric bias to it, right. So that is the irony over here. By way of illustration, we might consider how the scene with the district commissioner continues. So, that's the scene where the district commissioner is asked to help, to bring people to get Okonkwo's body from the tree because the locals will not touch it because suicide is an abominable act. It's prohibited by the religion. So, they are seeking the help of the district commissioner to get the corpse down.

Again, the irony here is quite... interesting, it is almost comical, where, you know, it pretends as if he is trying to bring civilization to different parts of Africa, because apparently Africa had no civilization before the Europeans came, which is again, a very, very Eurocentric assumption, presupposition. Now, one of them was that a district commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write, he would stress that point. So again, look how this becomes some kind of a legacy narrative that he wants to create and pass on to subsequent generations in terms of to-do, not to-do list. If you are a position of the district commissioner, what are the things that you should be doing, what are the things you should prevent yourself from doing. And one of the obvious things they shouldn't do is to look bad in front of the natives, look undignified in front of the natives, because dignity over here is obviously a discursive construct that consolidates the supremacy of the white man, right? So that must not be questioned at any cost. And we also told he's writing a book for his subsequent generations and where he's planning to highlight this very point. Now Achebe makes much the same point himself, though obviously to a very different effect in his essay *Colonialist Criticism* where he is obviously writing about the Eurocentricity of colonial knowledge and entire epistemic ecology and this is what he writes in that essay *Colonialist Criticism*. To the colonialist mind, it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say, I know my natives. So, again, knowledge here is a powerful paradigm, is a paradigm of power through which natives can be classified and predicted. So, this is, again, a very important point to be made. because why would you spend so much of capital on knowledge, why would you

spend so much of attention, epistemic, cultural, military attention on knowing the natives, on knowledge gathering because that would also help you preempt any subversion. This will help you predict any behaviour and that predictive quality of knowledge preemptive quality of knowledge is important because that would help you stop any potential rebellion or subversion of any kind. I know my natives, a claim which implied two things at once.

One, A, that a native was really quite simple. It's easy to know the native. That's the assumption. And B, that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand. So again, knowledge and control, knowledge and question over here, they go hand in hand. So, understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding, right? So, control, cohesion, territorialization, manipulations, all these things become really interestingly implicated in a knowledge gathering, knowledge circulation paradigm that we are studying. yet notice how carefully Achebe has chosen his words. It is important for the colonialist mind to not, not to know what the natives, but to be able to say, I know my natives. So that iteration, the utterance is important. I know my natives. The ability to say it, right, the hubris, the arrogance and obviously the political the political quality of saying this, utterance of I know my natives. What the district commissioner ultimately achieves is not genuine understanding, obviously not, but the illusion of understanding that comes with the power to control, right? So the entire illusion, the fantasy, the construct of control that is created through supposed understanding, right? So obviously there's no understanding a level of empathy. There's no understanding the level of proper genuine kinship. But what is there instead is some kind of epistemic architecture, an epistemic design, a discursive design, which creates a solution of understanding with which the colonialist administrator can proudly say, well, I know my natives.

Again, look at the word my over here. That obviously gives a sense of ownership. So, he owns the natives, almost like a human commodity. And obviously, what he owns, he must be able to articulate that he understands the natives right even though he does not really at a human level right. So, we have two different discourses over here, two different designs.

One obviously the human design where there is no proper empathy, no proper sympathy, no proper kinship and the other being the discursive design with which this you know assumptions and presuppositions of knowledge and control and question are articulated. So, every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter in him. So, Okonkwo becomes a chapter. So, this is a classic example of epistemic commodification or epistemic reification, where Okonkwo transforms from being a person to being a text, right. He's not a real human being. He's just a text. He's just a case study to be used as some kind of a cautionary tale and also some kind of a preemptive strategy for subsequent administrators. So, one could almost write a whole chapter on him, perhaps not perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph at any rate. So, the reason why we are reading this, because again, notice how the measurability of the human man over here is interesting. So maybe we can devote a whole chapter or conclude. or maybe not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph.

So again, the quantifiability, the way it's quantified with number of words, with the length in the page. So, all these become part of the metrics-oriented mechanism of knowledge that was the vital part of the imperial engine. that is how the knowledge was gathered, compiled, created, circulated, shared, very, very metrics oriented, right. So number, measure, so all these became very important. So, a whole chapter or maybe a whole paragraph that that debate is entirely about the metrics, is entirely about the measurable quality, the quantifiable idea. So, there was so much else to include, but one must be firm in cutting out details. Again, the irrelevant details are cut out again, the question, the politics of relevance becomes important. What serves as part of the main cautionary tale that those are things which must get in and the ones that don't fit in should be excluded because, you know, we don't need any excessive human emotional details over here. So, which goes to show that this is not really an effort to have a proper human existential empathetic understanding. On the contrary, it's an understanding purely based on measurement and metrics had already chosen the title of the book after much thought the pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger that's the book that he has in mind uh the pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger so again if you look at the title the whole enterprise

is to tame those people down, is to control those people down. So how to pacify them, how to control them, how to territorialize the lower Niger, right, the primitive tribes. Again, the choice of adjectives is very important because the assumption is that these tribes are very primitive, they are very backward, they are very regressive. And it is the job of the European to come and tame them, to come and pacify them. So that becomes the perfect vocabulary of the imperial enterprise.

With these words, *Things Fall Apart* completes this passage from the heroic tragedy of the first ending to the biting irony of the second ending. So again, the second ending is quite ironical because it is presented from the focal point of the district commissioner. In his well-known essay on *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe argues against European accounts of Africa that have reduced his people to, and I quote Achebe quoting Conrad, rudimentary souls, capable only of a violent babble of uncouth sounds, right? So again, this is a famous Achebe account to sort of *Heart of Darkness*, which is why we have both these novels over here. And Achebe's criticism of Conrad is, is very valid is that how that kind of a representation doesn't give any voice to Africa or any African subject but reduces them to rudimentary souls, reduces them to some kind of a primitive tribe who are only capable of a violent babble of uncouth sounds, so incomprehensible uncouth sounds. So, in presenting Okonkwo's epic story, epitomized by the first ending, Achebe offers a powerful counter-statement to the dark continent idea of Africa. So, again, the darkness of Africa here is important because darkness obviously is the opposite of illumination and that is very much part of the binary strategy of imperialism where illumination was white, illumination was knowledge and the non-white, racial non-white is also equated with non-knowledge or darkness, right. So that binary was obviously there which is something which is critiqued by Achebe here. a second ending, he does something more. By ironically undermining the perspective of the district commissioner by exposing the latter's personal ignorance, not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, and political interests, the pacification of the lower tribes or lower Niger, Achebe seeks to confront and finally to discredit the entire discourse of colonialism, those quasi-historical, quasi-anthropological writings that have treated Africa as nothing more, are again, I quote Achebe, a foil to Europe, a place of negation. So, this is a very Edward Said kind of an argument, you know, the perfect creation

of the Orient, which is just there to serve as a foil, either through an excess, either through monstrosity, either through, you know, inadequacy, whatever the strategic situation may be.

But the whole point is to create the non-European and non-white as a foil to Europe, as a place for negations, where you can dump your fantasies, dump your excesses, dump your fears. It becomes a big dumping ground epistemically, as well as a level of fantasy, right? So this entire creation of Africa as just a passive foil to Europe is something which is part of a larger paradigm of knowledge production and and preservation and you know this this uh chapter of the book this title of the book really that a district commissioner in the novel wants to write which is a pacification the primitive tribes of the lower niger is very much part of the orientalist enterprise which should just just create project africa as some kind of foil to the civilized tame europe right and of course the chevy is satirizing it comically he's undermining authority of the district commissioner or the perspective of the district commissioner where he thinks ironically that he knows everything about Africa, he knows everything about the Igbo land and he has authority, the political as well as the epistemic authority to write a book where he can measure Okonkwo's location either through a paragraph or an entire chapter. So, the entire thing is caricatured by Achebe right and so this becomes a caricature of the crude knowledge paradigm, the crude epistemic apparatus of imperialism from the perspective of the colonizer. So that becomes the important focal position over here, which is why Begum, the writer of this essay, calls this particular ending as part of the adversarial history writing, the counter-history writing that Achebe is offering. So, we stop at this point today, in this particular session, and we'll continue with this essay and begin to wind up in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.