

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 48

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 4

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We're looking at Chinua Achebe's novel Things for the Part. So we're just discussing in the previous session how the second ending of this novel is quite ironical and the irony obviously is meant to, is designed to undermine the authority of the district commissioner and it offers a bigger critique, a bigger structural critique of the different knowledge politics, the epistemic politics associated with imperialism and how this collusion of power and knowledge, the collusion between classification and territorialization was rampant, scandalous at that point of time. And we will just continue reading that and see how Achebe offers and sort of achieves the ironical undermining of colonial authority. with a caricature representation of the district commissioner. And this should be on your screen. At the same time, the second ending begins to redefine our points of view on the tragic events of the novel. So, you know, it offers a different valency altogether, one that is not quite tragic, but also, you know, as a symbol of triumph of the European. But of course, that triumph is ironically undermined because it's caricatured. Although this ending is clearly meant to undermine the District Commissioner's position, indeed to portray him as a fool, it nevertheless substantially alters the tone and mood of Achebe's resolution.

Obviously, the novel would read very differently, and its tragedy functioned very differently, if it concluded with, let's say, a heroic recitation of Okonkwo's Suicide by Obereka. In other words, the final chapter of Things Fall Apart serves not as a simple denouement conclusion, one that helps us sort out a rather messy climax, but as a significant qualification of what has gone before. a distinctly new ending that complicates

our sense of achievers' approach to both history and tragedy. So, this complication is important. This problematization is important because it doesn't really clean up the mess entirely. It leaves it a little bit inconclusive in quality, but at the same time, it offers many focal points of view with which the same ending, the same event could be viewed in different ways, almost like what we call the Rashomon effect. where each retelling offers a different interpretation, each retelling offers a different possibility, interpretative and epistemic possibility. Now, in this regard, so this point where we talk about Achebe's own position apropos of imperialism, apropos of three imperial Africa, and so on and so forth. In this regard, it is important to remember what Achebe himself has observed in interviews and essays, that while the passing away of traditional Igbo culture involved profound loss, it also held out the possibility of substantial gain. So, this is where the really historical complexity of imperialism gets played out where imperialism was a terrible thing. It did some untold, unimaginable atrocities through Africa. But at the same time, it also brought around many possibilities of gain, many possibilities of profit for many African people, right. So, it also created some upliftment potential for many African subjects. And that too has to be acknowledged, as Achebe does.

Thus, when he was asked about returning to pre-colonial society, the kind of world Okonkwo inhabited before things fell apart, Achebe responded, it's not really a question of going back. I think if one goes back, there's something wrong somewhere, or it's a misunderstanding, right? So, there is a sense of this very uncritical romantic view of the pre-colonial past is also resisted by Achebe. So, he resists that kind of a romantic reification as well. He says he doesn't want to go back. The idea of going back to pre-colonial times is not the solution. It's not the panacea to all the problems of Africa. And he says there's always a possibility of something going wrong or a misunderstanding happening if that is a political project. In another interview, he pushed the position further, arguing that colonization was a multifaceted phenomenon which had produced benefits as well as burdens. So, the entire ambivalent legacy of colonialism, the fact that it produced a lot of benefits as well as burdens, a lot of possibilities as well as precarity, which is a very, very complex and nuanced way to study the historical engines which were at play during colonization, during colonialism. And he says it in that particular interview, Achebe, I am

not one of those who would say that Africa has gained nothing at all during the colonial period. I mean, this is ridiculous. We gained a lot. So again, the historical processes which produce possibilities, which produce a lot of benefits and momentum and profits for many subjects, is also acknowledged by Achebe, which makes him a very, very complex and authentic historian of his country, of his identity. Finally, and most tellingly, he has insisted that despite his own ambivalence on the subject, modernization is a necessary and essential part of Africa's future. The comprehensive goal of a developing nation like Nigeria is, of course, development or is somewhat better variant modernization.

I don't see much argument about that. So again, he doesn't really reject modernization, which came with imperialism. but saw that as a necessary process, a necessary process of production and moving forward in time. So, it is important that Achebe is rescued from a certain kind of criticism, a certain kind of scholarship which looks at him as a pure nativist, as someone who purely wants to go back to a pre-colonial past and recover a romantic idea of Africa or Nigeria. He is very much aware of the complexities of colonization, of colonialism and how that brought about certain benefits as well as obviously some terrible things. So, the complexity, the ambivalence is articulated quite in a very nuanced way by Achebe. And he is also acknowledging, he is very much acknowledging and sort of opening up about the modernization and the benefits that had brought to Nigeria, to its people, to many different kinds of subject positions. Now, what all this means is that Achebe's response to colonization is far more nuanced, far more complex than most critics have recognized or been willing to acknowledge, because he is seen as someone who is very much against colonization, very, very critical of colonization. Of course, he is. But at the same time, he is also a very responsible historian.

He is a very responsible chronicler of his community. And he obviously acknowledges the fact that colonization or colonialism also brought in some very, very telling positives to his people. That ambivalence is articulated consistently by Achebe. How such complexity expresses itself, how it modifies Achebe's sense of tragedy is further explored in the third ending. So, we see the polyphonic endings of Achebe's novel, how it sort of really offers many different kinds of perspectives and how each ending offers a different version of

history rewriting re-inscription etc. and that puts the entire thing together really makes a novel a very complex artifact, a very complex story which takes on different meanings at different points of time. So, what I shall identify as a third ending is located in *No Longer at Ease*, the sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. So again, the two stories are dialoguing with each other. It's a natural sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. No doubt, the assertion that one text contains the ending of another will immediately strike some readers as dubious. Such a claim begins to gain credibility, however, when we remember that Achebe originally conceived of his two novels as the first and third sections of a single work. That was the original plan Achebe had. In other words, the compositional history of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* provides some justification for treating the latter as a continuation of the former, an extension that qualifies a concrete story, even redirects its course. Indeed, there is good reason to argue that *No Longer at Ease* is not only a continuation of *Things Fall Apart*, but also a rewriting of it, one that essentially recapitulates the action of the earlier novel, although in a markedly different setting. So, we see how hard at darkness *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, they all end in something of a triangulated relationship.

Where they retell each other and also rewrite each other. So retelling is also rewriting as you go back to the earlier novel and you know reinterpret it as a reader, right. So that obviously makes you some kind of a co-author and that positions all these novels together in some kind of a really complex epistemic economy where they speak to each other but also deconstruct each other. Hence, both novels tell the story of a representative of the Igbo people who takes a stand on a question of principle and is destroyed in the ensuing collision between African and European values. To paraphrase one critic, the fall of Okonkwo's machete is replaced by the fall of the judge's gavel, as we are transported from the heroic to a legalistic world, but the narrative outline remains essentially the same. The very structure of *No Longer at Ease* indicates, then, that Okonkwo's story has not reached its end, that a tragic destiny it implies continues to be lived out. So the legacy, the continuing legacy of Okonkwo's story is also underlined in *No Longer at Ease*. Now, what this also means is how stories ensure legacy, how stories ensure memory, what we call post-memory, as in memory of something which happened earlier, You didn't experience it, but

you inherited it through intergenerational transmissions, storytelling transmissions, oral transmissions, cultural transmissions, and so on and so forth. So, the very post-memory quality of no longer at ease becomes important. Other settings become important.

They're very different. And notice how the settings, the difference in setting is marked by the difference in metaphors. So, the machete in *Things Fall Apart* is replaced by the judge's gavel in *No Longer at Ease* because the setting is more legalistic, it's more judiciary, right? So that setting is highlighted using that gavel metaphor. This does not mean, however, that in writing, things fall apart and are no longer at ease as independent works. Achebe somehow betrayed the internal logic of his own narrative. On the contrary, the decision to treat Okonkwo's and Obi Okonkwo's stories separately contributes to what I have called Achebe's palimpsestic effect. The sense that the same or similar events acquire new meanings in different contexts. So, the palimpsestic quality is a really good metaphor because it builds on top of the other as an organic thing. So, each build on top of the other and this sort of a complex multi-layered meaning, the multi-layered architecture of meaning is really interesting because it offers us different versions of the same history, different diachronic points, right. And the different diachronic points are important because they help us not just to move forward in time, but also to go back in time and rewrite and reinterpret what had happened earlier, using the knowledge apparatus of the present. It is therefore not surprising that in moving from the first novel to the second, we observe Okonkwo's traditional tragedy transform itself into Obi's modern tragedy, and the heroic gives way to the ironic.

So, the irony becomes the new mood, the new sentimental structure, from the tragic, right. So that's a very natural sequence to what had happened earlier. So, we see how the narrative sequence and sentimental sequences, they overlap with each other, they speak to each other in very, very interesting ways. Now the point of intersection between the two novels, the scene in which I locate the third ending of things fall apart occurs when Okonkwo's grandson, Obi, a university-educated civil servant, finds himself discussing tragedy with a British colonial officer, right? So, this is, you're cutting back into the present, cutting into the present, sorry, cutting forward into the present, where Obi, who happens to be the

grandson of Okonkwo, he is now a civil servant who is universally educated. So, you know, it's very much in the European epistemic apparatus. He finds himself discussing history and tragedy with the British colonial officer. So, this obviously is a very ironical situation. Obi advances, opinion of special interest given the first ending of *Things Fall Apart* that Suicide ruins a tragedy. And this is a quotation that is there. Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies, and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W. H. Auden. The rest of the world is unaware of it, like the man in a handful of dust who reads Dickens to Mr. Todd. There's no release for him. When the story ends, he's still reading. There is no purging of the emotions for us because we are not there.

So, there is a present continuous quality about tragedy that Obi is highlighting over here. And it moves away from any neat sense of resolution and a neat sense of purgation. So that movement, the resistance against neatness is important over here because the sense that tragedy is still something which is still going on is highlighted here as well. And the irresolution of tragedy, the irresolvable quality of tragedy is also highlighted. So, if you look at the first sentence again, real tragedy is never resolved. So, the reality of tragedy lies precisely in its irresolvability. And the irresolvability of tragedy is also what's something that we can go back and read things fall apart with. It is so profoundly irresolvable. And again, the irresolvability is what makes it the real tragic, right? So, the reality and the irresolvability are connected together. and how tragedy becomes more tragic precisely because it doesn't have a resolution, it doesn't have a neat ending. And it goes on hopelessly forever ad infinitum. Now, Obi draws a distinction in this passage between two kinds of tragedy. In traditional or Aristotelian tragedy, we saw, you know, Aristotle, of course, was a big advocate for resolution, catharsis, and closure. At the end of it, that is one way of looking at tragedy in a monumental way. The other, obviously, is tragedy as something which is left untidy. So, the Aristotelian tragedy is a clear resolution, an aesthetic payoff that comes in the form of catharsis. But a modern or ironic tragedy, the tragedy described in *Odin and Mude Bu Arts*, the fall from a high place is likened to Bruegel's famous painting *Vicarious*. In the foreground, the ploughman ploughs the field. In the background,

the ship sails on its way. And it's only after careful inspection that we're able to discover the place of tragedy.

There's a corner. In the corner, barely perceptible, we see Icarus's two legs breaking the surface of the water. Sole testimony of his personal catastrophe, right? So, the almost indecipherability of tragedy, the almost, the very non-monumental tragedy quality of tragedy, the almost invisible quality of tragedy is highlighted over here. Very, very anti-Aristotelian. It doesn't require catharsis. It doesn't really aim at catharsis. It doesn't really aim at grand resolution and aesthetic category in the end, but something which remains profoundly and tragically irresolvable, right? So again, irresolvability becomes the big problem of part of the representational mechanism over here. And, you know, the painting alluded to over here, the Brigio painting of Icarus is a very good case in point. I mean, quite literally a spectacular case in point because we find that the foreground, which is a ploughman, there's a background of the ship and somewhere in the middle, almost unnoticed, a tragedy is happening, right? So very, very anti-monumental, very, very anti-cathartic and very anti-Aristotelian. Now, while the point of departure for Obi's discussion of tragedy is Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, his observations have an obvious application to *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo's story, as viewed from the Igbo perspective, presents history in the form of classical or heroic tragedy.

Okonkwo's story as viewed from the district commissioner's perspective presents history in the form of modern or ironic tragedy, right? So, these two are obviously in conflict with each other as well as in dialogue with each other. One of Obi's remarks is particularly apposite there's no purging of the emotions in a modern tragedy because we are not there. So, the fact that we are not situated in that frame means that there's no catharsis available. We are elsewhere. The reader is elsewhere, so it should remain irresolvable. So, these words perfectly describe the situation of the district commissioner. He was not there in the sense that he was never in a position of genuinely to understand Okonkwo, to appreciate who he was and what he represented. So, the elsewhere situation, the elsewhere location of the district commissioner is important and that is exactly and ironically what gives them the ironic perspective or what makes them the embodiment of the ironic representation of

tragedy, that he was elsewhere. So, the elsewhere-ness over here becomes a political position as well as a representational position. So, it can only be described in a very oblique, non-neat way, not through any monumental, you know, catharsis closure, but through some kind of an elsewhere, some kind of banality happening elsewhere and almost as a flippant, ironical afterthought. Now it is important to stress, however, that a novel's first ending is not in some way compromised because it is associated with the conventional, while the novel's second ending is in some way enhanced because it is somewhat associated with the real. So, there's no value judgment that Begum is making over here. The claim is not that the first ending is inferior or lesser compared to the second one, but there's just different kinds of representational tactics. Indeed, if Achebe provides us with any controlling point of view, it comes with a third ending, which illustrates the vexed and ambiguous relation in which the post-colonial stands to his own past. So, the retelling of the past that comes with a very vexed position, which is a third ending.

For with his remarks on tragedy, Obi is offering a narrative analysis of what is literally his own past. In describing a tragedy that ends in suicide, he is describing his grandfather's tragic fall. So, the Icarus metaphor is used in some sense and significance for Igbo culture after it was lost, after things fall apart or fell apart. So, this is like a post hoc representation because he was not there, remember. So, Obi's position here is, you know, is a retelling, an analysis of his own past, right. So, he is describing a suicide, he is describing its significance in Obi, in Igbo culture, but only, only after it is lost, only after the exhaustion of it, not during the process, not during the moment of loss, but only post hoc, right. And that temporality is important over here, the temporal distance is important over here. So, what the novel's third ending illustrates then is that the boundaries between the conventional and the real, the heroic and the ironic are not clearly or cleanly drawn. So, again that is the meta-analysis over here that ironic and the tragic, the heroic and the flippant are all mixed together in very, very asymmetric ways. So, the boundaries are never really drawn in a proper sense of the term. From Obi's perspective, which is why this novel is so complex, which is why this is a very, very postmodern novel in many senses despite also being very, very postcolonial. From Obi's perspective, and for the matter, the reader's, Okonkwo functions both as a literary persona and a living person, an epic hero and a

historical anachronism. So, notice how the different epithets begin to mix. So, he is an epic hero of almost mythical proportion as well as a historical anachronism. He is a literary persona that one can read about in text at the same time as a living person with whom Obi has a direct kinship, a biological kinship.

So, all these different categories are entangled together. Yet, the novel does not invite us to select one of the alternatives so much as to understand decidedly distinctive truths they articulate. In other words, we are not meant to choose from among three possible endings, but to read all of them, as it were, simultaneously and palimpsestically. That's a very important word, palimpsestically. One in correlation with the other, one on top of the other, one informing and shaping the others, like a perfect palimpsest. You can't have one without the other. The entire structure is multi-layered and each layer contributes to its meaning. So, the semantic mapping which happens over here, the interpretative architecture over here is profoundly palimpsestic in quality. If we're able to do this, we shall see how whichever sense of an ending is intimately bound up with his sense of cultural loss. How the tragedy of the past necessarily depends on the perspective of the present. And how the history is inevitably written for both they who are there and we who are not there. So, we stop at this point today, but it's important to unpack this really beautiful phrase. Because you see, what happens is the first-person perspective of tragedy, the insider perspective of tragedy, which is somewhat grand, somewhat tragic, somewhat monumental in quality. That is, we who were there. the lived immediate perspective of tragedy, tragedy as a lived reality, tragedy as an immediate reality. And we who are not there is the outsider perspective of tragedy, the epistemic outsider, the epistemic other, the position from where the tragedy is being designed, which is more ironic in quality, sometimes flippant in quality, sometimes self-reflexive in quality both the embedded and the reflexive are put together over here and obviously what Achebe is not doing, he is not sort of hierarchizing it, he is not saying well one is more important than the other but rather he is offering us different versions of the same event, he is offering us different tragic articulations, right. And the tragic articulations are monumental as well as ironical. They are profoundly immediate as well as, you know, self-reflexively flippant sometimes. And so, this entanglement, this sort of palimpsestic quality really gives the novel its legacy that we sort

of see it happening, see it enjoying today. And part of the legacy is because of its palimpsestic, multi-layered, polyphonic quality, and which is exactly what Begam was also talking about over here, that we see how the sense of ending is bound up with loss.

So, ending is loss, ending is eradication, ending is erasure. But the tragedy here is also dependent on the perspective of the present. You can only have the fullest sense of tragedy by looking back from the present, not just looking at it from the position of experientiality of the immediate position, but by also looking back from the position of removedness, from the position of distance, right, and only from a distance we can see how it is written for both they who were there, who suffered it, who lost it, at the same time they were not there, who emerged from it, who subsequently moved away from it, which is the position of Obi, the grandson of Okonkwo. So, we see how the multi-temporality of tragedy is important over here. The multi-sentimentality of tragedy is important over here. How you can accommodate an article with multiple sentiments, which makes it such a polyphonic novel, such a palimpsestic novel. So, we stop at this point today and we'll continue and hopefully wind up the reading in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.