

Course Name: The Novel and Change

Professor Name: Dr. Avishek Parui

Department Name: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Institute Name: IIT Madras

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Lecture 49

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 5

Hi and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We're looking at Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart. So, these will be the concluding sessions for this novel. We're looking at Richard Begum's essay on the three different kinds of endings and how those correspond to three different interpretative possibilities of the novel The Things Fall Apart and of course how it all connects through the very interesting representation and illustration of dichronic changes. obviously connected to imperialism, colonialism and their aftermath. So, in this particular section, we'll look at the concluding part of the essay and see how it corresponds to some of the themes we have been talking about already. So, this should be on your screen. At the beginning of this paper, I asked three questions about the relation of post-colonial literature to the writing of history. So, we talked already quite extensively about the whole idea of rewriting and how each act of rewriting is also an act of revision and how each act of revision can also be potentially an act of deconstruction. There are three dialogic texts that we established in a triangulated relationship where Heart of Darkness, Things Fall Apart and of course the other novel that this writer mentions No Longer at Ease.

So No Longer at Ease is of course a sequel to Things Fall Apart where we have the character of Obi who is the grandson of Okonkwo and how that novel writes back in a certain sense some of the contents, some of the themes and concerns of Things Fall Apart. So, I would now like to propose, however provisionally, some answers to these questions. First, where do postcolonial writers locate their past? Now, what we see happening in this section is a very interesting intersection of postcoloniality and postmodern writing. And

there is a really interesting attempt to rescue postcolonial writers from an over-determined reading of, you know, cultural, political and social context. but also paying attention, playing a lot of focus on their treatment of form, the formalistic qualities of post-colonial writing and how those correspond to some of the traditions of post-modernism. So, that sense, the formal content, the formal representation also becomes important as do the themes and cultural context represented in the novels. First, where do post-colonial writers locate the past? There is certainly no single or definitive response to this question. But a writer like Achebe is acutely aware of how problematic are the issues it raises. So, for this reason, things fall apart and no longer at ease not only situate themselves in the periods of historical transition and the two transitions being Nigeria at the turn of the 20th century, Nigeria in the 1950s. And, you know, we've spoken about how already these two novels speak to each other, no longer at ease and things fall apart.

But also superimpose these periods on each other through a series of intertextual connections, suggesting that post-colonial writers are the products of all the historical periods through which the culturals have lived. So, again we have a sense of how each writer is situated and how the writing of each writer must be situated in that particular cultural, social, political context, but also how each writer is able to offer a very unique formalistic play, especially a writer of the quality of Achebe. When we read his writings, his novels, it is also important for us to pay a lot of attention on the form, the treatment, the narrative method that he espouses. Secondly, can we confidently assign decisive beginnings and conclusive endings to the various epochs of colonial and postcolonial history? So, the politics of origin, the politics of inception becomes very important when we look at postcolonial writing because that sometimes determines the entire process of transcription. So, what kind of history is being written larger depends on the starting point of history. So, what do you define as a starting point? How do you locate the starting point? So, location itself becomes discursively designed and politically motivated. So, it is not immediately apparent how Achebe would answer this question, but his experiment in extended closure reminds us that a narrative shaping and necessity that necessarily comes with beginnings and endings is a human creation, a product of what Richard Rorty, the philosopher Richard Rorty calls contingency rather than a naturally occurring or divinely

given reality. So, the fact that three different endings are three different ways one can read the endings of this novel and also how it speaks of no longer at ease. goes to show the manipulative nature of endings and how a writer of Achebe's quality can also foreground these manipulations, foreground the constructed quality of endings and in the process really expose the storytelling method as an artifact, as something which is sort of discursively designed rather than divinely given, right. So, it really secularizes the storytelling method.

It talks about storytelling as a human activity, as something which is, you know, given to or prone to unreliability, prone to bias, prone to subjective situatedness and so on and so forth. So it is that each of these three endings with which Achebe concludes things fall apart, grows out of different interests, different assumptions, different intentions and none of these is ultimately true in itself. So, what we have in a nutshell, in a very macro reading of this passage is how different versions of truth are produced and promoted and not just one version which obviously goes to show how the grand narrative of truth is reconstructed, is broken, is fragmented and so we have very experiential, atomistic idea of truth, atomistic engagements with truth. Finally, what historical stance should post-colonial writers assume towards their own history? So, again the whole idea of historiography we talked about, the politics of writing history, the politics of inscription embedded in history, these things, these questions become really important not just history as a uncritically produced and consumed product but the processes of writing history. The inclusions and exclusions, the articulations, the absences, all these three come together and factor in the complex composition of history.

This is a particularly difficult problem and one that cannot be fully treated in the space that remains. Still, it is worth observing that Achebe has not only qualified the kind of nationalist history with which his work is so often associated, but also, he has shown a willingness to criticize traditional Igbo culture. So, this ambivalence is very, very important. the ambivalence of representation where the critique is not just directed towards the colonizer's presence or the colonialist history, but the critique is also directed towards the traditional templates of Igbo culture. So that really promotes Achebe's legacy as a really, really complex writer, as someone who has an ambivalent and a very nuanced

perspective on the different historical realities such as colonialism, imperialism and so on and so forth. So, while Achebe urgently feels the need to recuperate an African past that has been lost or overlooked, to tell a story that has not been told, he nevertheless recognizes the importance of maintaining a sense of intellectual and historical integrity, right. So, the sense of integrity is important and when we talk about integrity we also talk about complexity in the same light. So integrity is obviously polyphonic in quality. Integrity doesn't mean homogeneity. Integrity remains or encourages heterogeneity, encourages polyphony, encourages the heteroclassic representation where many voices, many interpretative possibilities are laid bare as it were.

And there is a passage from Achebe really which corroborates this point. The question is how does a writer recreate this past? So, you can see these are the sections which are really important for us at a macro level because it talks about how the discipline of postcolonial studies can really speak to us in a course like this where the relationship between text and context are very, very complex and contingent where the context informs the text but at the same time the text can offer some autonomous representation of anticipated context, right. The text here becomes both a product of representation and also an activity of anticipation. So therein lies the bidirectionality, the bitemporality, the multi-temporality really and the palimpsest quality that texts like *Things Fall Apart* can produce and promote. So, the question is, how does the writer recreate this past? Quite clearly there, there's a strong temptation to idealize it. So, there's a very easy seduction to romanticize the past, to go back and recreate the past in a very romantic, uncritical way, which obviously is beautiful and tempting, but quite largely inauthentic in quality, to extol its good point and pretend that the bad never existed. But the credibility of the world, the writer, is attempting to recreate will be called into question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long technical or ideal. We have to admit, like other people's past, ours had its good as well as its bad sides. We talked about this in a previous session as well, whichever is very careful not to romanticize the pre-colonial past, not to sort of give an idyllic picture uncritical idealic picture of a pre-colonial past where nothing bad existed.

Equally he acknowledges some of the positives which emerge out of the colonial presence, out of the processes of colonization, right. So, it's not just a neat binary of bad and good but it's actually a very nuanced and complex perspective on the entire historical reality of colonialism. And like all good writers he foregrounds the good and the bad, the complexity, the mixtures, entanglements and so on and so forth. The last general point that I would like to make touches upon methodology. So, this is where we find the interface of the postcolonial and the postmodern take place, how not just the theme, not just the issues and the content of what Achebe talks about but equally the formal methods, the narrative methods, the narrative designs Achebe is trying to promote, the stylistic interventions Achebe is trying to achieve which also should be studied equally carefully. So, too often the literature we call postcolonial has been read as little more than an exercise in political thematics. So that is the obvious temptation the moment here about something like postcolonial literature the obvious gravitation is towards looking at the themes, historical realities, the retellings and so on and so forth. which is obviously attractive and it often produces really good interpretative designs. But and this is why this essay is really good. It talks about how we should pay equal attention if not more attention to the former methods, the narrative experiments, the designs, the aesthetic choices which go into the making of these texts.

So that since things fall apart is a really interesting text to be studied from the perspective of post-colonialism but also equally from the perspective of post-modernism. Such an approach is not surprising, given the enormous historical pressure out of which this literature was born, but it has led many critics to ignore crucial issues of form and technique. Yet, as I have sought to show, we can only begin to appreciate how a writer like Achebe envisions his past, both as history and tragedy. If you understand how he narratively shapes his material, how he achieves his sense of an ending. Attention to formal organization is particularly important in the case of Achebe because he conceives of history neither in teleological or positivistic terms but as something human beings create, a series of stories built around beginnings and endings, a narrative construction. So, again, this is a very, very important point. Achebe is a writer who is acutely aware of the constructed

quality of history and to that end he is equally aware of the constructed quality of his own narrative, of his own storytelling method, right. So, we read Achebe, we read a novel like *Things Fall Apart*, a magnificent novel really. We have to pay equal attention to the formal designs, the narrative strategies, the absences, the articulations, the foregroundings, the backgroundings, the different focal positions. So, all these different kinds of narrative methods, artistic choices, craftsmanship really, should be taken into consideration and not just a very blunt reading of the themes and historical context which inform and shape the text.

That's obviously there. But what is equally important for us to realize and notice and recognize is the former methods, other former methods that Achebe is trying to espouse. A writer like Achebe obviously is very careful about the choices, the narrative choices, the designs that he is trying to espouse. Like all good writers of history, of historical reality, Achebe tries to resist an ideological or positivistic understanding of history in terms of looking at it from a logical perspective, from a granularity perspective, from a monumental perspective. But rather he is more aware or more interested in the granularity of history, the slow changes of history, the experiential affective prisms of history, which is why he is very, very conscious and careful and honest about laying bare the narrative method as an act of construction, really. Manipulation is an artifact. It's something which is manufactured and prone to manipulation. So that interesting entanglement is there in Achebe's stories. So, it's a series of stories, a story ecology, really. That's why the metaphor of the palimpsest in the previous class was so helpful because it builds on structure after structure and each structure has a sense of granularity and atomistic reality and a sense of constructedness which is very important for us to acknowledge because it really undercuts any grand claim to truth, any grand claim to history, any grand claim to a monolithic understanding of the past, because that kind of monolithic understanding can often quickly spill over into a romantic reification, something which is romanticized, something which is really whitewashed and made into something really big and monumental.

So there is an anti-monumental quality about Achebe's writing. That is something which you have to take into consideration because of the writer, he is acutely aware of the

constructive processes that inform the idea of the novel, the shaping of the novel. So this is not to say that Achebe is fundamentally a postmodern writer, but neither is exclusively a postcolonial writer, right? So, there is an intersectionality about Achebe. He is postmodern as well as postcolonial, and the two don't undercut each other, they actually supplement each other. So, this particular section of the essay is really important, Richard Begum's understanding of the sense of ending, because at a very fundamental level, the different endings in the novel is something really postmodern. It gives a sense of false endings it gives a sense of you know multiple endings and the polyphony of the ending is really important for us to highlight and study. But at the same time, it is an acutely and profoundly postcolonial novel. So, at the bottom of this section is a really interesting philosophy that a postcolonial and the postmodern can coexist with each other. In fact, they can supplement each other in very strong, robust, organic ways. So, he's neither a postmodern nor exclusively a postcolonial writer. He can be both. Or rather, to put the matter more precisely, he is a post-colonial writer insofar as he is a product of cultural globalization, insofar as he is an African who has grown up and continues to live at the crossroads of cultures, right? So, there is this hybrid liminality about Achebe's own position as a writer. So, I think the positionality of the writer is important over here because that sort of shapes his output, his productivity and his literary oeuvre. So, he's not really a pure African writer, if there's any such thing. So, he really resists any romanticization of Africa. He really resists any romantic reification of a pre-colonial Africa.

He doesn't do that at all. In fact, he's very, very conscious and critical of many of the African traditions that he finds regressive in a pre-colonial setting. And obviously he's a very big critique of colonialism, he's a big critique of the racism that was rampantly produced and promoted during colonization processes, which is why his story, *Things Fall Apart*, may be seen as a resistance and as a reaction to the Conrad story, *Heart of Darkness*. But of course, it doesn't stop there because when it comes to something like *No Longer at Ease* that novel looks back at *Things Fall Apart* in a very deconstructive way. So, there is this biological as well as textual kinship that is there between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* because Okonkwo and Obi are obviously biologically related to each other but also the two novels are textually related to each other. They sort of deconstruct each

other in very, very interesting ways. So, the intersectionality or the intersectional positionality of Achebe as a writer is very important for us to acknowledge because that really gives us a really right lens to look at his writings, to really study his writings in a very robust and refreshingly original ways without really pigeonholing him as a postmodern writer only or a postmodern writer only. So, he can be many writers put together but different strands which inform his writing and it's important for us as competent readers to rescue him from any kind of interpretative reification. Obviously, life at the crossroads is not easy. As a student of classical tragedy, not to mention a sometimes-rebellious son, he is aware of the perils as well as the possibilities that await us at those places of a deeper intersection. Now, we talked about the different kinds of tragedy.

There is this monumental classical tragedy of closure, which is quite aristotelian in quality but is also the ironic tragedy which can be flippant in quality, which can be self-reflexive in quality and so on and so forth. So, you know Achebe's position as a tragic writer as well as someone who is a student of classical literature is really at the crossroads as his essay is foregrounding. So as a student of classical tragedy, not to mention a somewhat rebellious son, he is aware of the perils as well as the possibilities that await us at those places of a deeper intersection. And what are the deeper intersections? The crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency, dangerous because a man can perish there, wrestling with multiple headed spirits, but also because he might be lucky and return to his people with a boon of prophetic vision, right? So, this perishability in the crossroad is also prophecy in the crossroad. So, that entanglement, that interplay of perishability and prophecy is important for us, because that's exactly what happens when things fall apart. So, Okonkwo, perishes, he biologically dies, his suicide can be seen as a symbolic act but it's also an act of prophecy of what to come, the imminent disaster, the imminent collapse, imminent crisis of a civilization which is about to come to an end. So, his suicide is both an act of perishing as well as an act of anticipation, right. So, you can see how Achebe manages to create a character so potent, so complex so rounded and so located at different points of temporalities really, right. So, the spirituality as well as prophecy which are working together as entanglements. But if forbearers like Okonkwo and alter egos like Oki Obi have been vanquished wrestling the demons of multiplicity, Achebe has emerged from these

spiritual contests with a deeper and more comprehensive sense of what it means to inhabit the alternate worlds of post-colonialism, worlds that are at once aristocratic and democratic.

Heroic and ironic, ancient and contemporary, right. So, we see all these different paradoxes punch together and you know in the sense that these are oxymoronic constructs but at the same time they don't lose out the fallacy, they actually come together and create this ecology of supplementarity. And what do I mean by ecology of supplementarity, where ontological opposites or seemingly ontological opposites, they come together and operate as supplements, operate as entanglements, right. And that's something fundamentally deconstructive about Achebe's writing. So, with the aristocratic and the democratic, they're entangled together as to the heroic and the ironic, the ancient and the contemporary, right? So, all these different figures, all these different configurations can come together, do come together to create this really fascinating and dazzling text that Achebe creates with things fall apart. Lastly, *We Are All* offers the heirs of Achebe's prophetic vision, grappling with the problems and promises of a globalized modernity, working our way through its diverse scenarios, its different endings, right. So this is why the essay concludes. It's a really magnificent essay. But what it does really, it talks about a sense of an ending, the different ways in which this novel can promote different forms of closures which are also non-closures. closures which are openings in the different kinds of epistemic and interpretative possibilities.

Now what it does at a very fundamental theoretical level is it really looks at postcolonial texts, the postcolonial mode of writing you know not homogenizing it but the fundamental postcolonial mode of writing. as something which is essentially, you know, resistant against any kind of a grand narrative of deconstruction, but rather it is more concerned with granularity, more concerned with atomistic truth, more concerned with fragmentation, interruption and the different processes of constructedness really which are laid bare in this particular kind of writing, right. So, Achebe's writing, Achebe's prophecy is one not of enlightenment, but one of granularity, one of grappling with the problems and promises of globalized modernity. Now, when you talk about globalized modernity, there is some kind

of a tension over there as well because at the heart of globalized modernity, there is a sort of the grand narrative of capitalism, there is this, you know, the hegemony of a certain kind of narrative, a certain kind of cultural appropriation And Achebe is obviously aware of that which is why this is a novel in English and not in you know in African language, right. So there is that choice of language as well which obviously makes Achebe a very complex writer at the heart of this intersection really looking forward to a globalized modernity as well as something as someone trying to recover.

Some facets of the past but not in an uncritical way, right, which is why it is important for us to recognize and acknowledge the fact that Achebe's vision of Africa, Achebe's representation of Africa is a very complex rounded representation and not something which relies on binaries or dualisms. Not for a moment he is saying anywhere in the novel as well as in his writings and interviews that a pre-colonial Africa is just this idyllic Edenic past that we also aspire to go back to. I mean he actually rejects that vision entirely. But at the same time, he is very critical of the interventions caused by imperialism which created untold human loss, which created a lot of damage of the topography of the ecology sometimes and catastrophic proportions of industrial scale. But at the same time, he is also aware of the ambivalent location through which you know many positives also emerge in Africa due to the arrival of you know the machineries of imperialism and colonialism. So, this is really a very interesting way to look at things full of thought and you can see how it speaks back in a certain sense to Heart of Darkness. Obviously, the critique of Heart of Darkness in many ways. But what this essay has tried to do is locate Achebe or rescue Achebe a little bit from being just a post-colonial writer.

So he is so much more really. He is someone whose play of form, whose technique, narrative methods are actually very, very interesting for us to recognize as well. and to study as well, right. And of course, the prophecy of Achebe is also nostalgic in quality, right. But it is not really a restorative nostalgia. It is a reflective nostalgia where there is self-reflexivity, where there is an acknowledgement of problems, an acknowledgement of the vices, an acknowledgement of the pitfalls really which must be addressed, right. So, there is that really complex ambivalent vision which is working over here, right. So, the

last bit about globalised modernity is very important as I mentioned and because that really encodes and captures the problems and promises of the kind of post-criminal vision that the chamber is trying to promote and narrativise in this particular story. Things fall apart. Now without we end this novel per se, but obviously we can discuss it through the different forums we have, but we will now move on to the different texts now. But what I hope you have done in the course of these last few sessions on this novel is look at how when we talk about human abuse, when we talk about post-colonial novel as a representation of abuse, a representation of trauma, and also erasure of identity, this must be studied in a very ambivalent method, in an ambivalent way.

Because even a writer like Achebe, who is so vocal and so articulate about his Nigerian identity, he's also very, very conscious of not really falling prey to this uncritical understanding of Nigerian-ness. And he's very vocal, very polyphonic. and very articulate about the ambivalences that emerge out of the colonial imperial interventions. So that's something that we have to bear in mind as well. So, with that we end Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. I hope it was an interesting novel for you. We did it right after the guide by Arkin Narayan and we can see how, hopefully you can see how each of the novels we selected for this course actually speak to each other in very interesting ways. There's an intertextual interconnectedness across all the novels and that's how we designed the course as a really interesting method through which texts can speak to context and vice versa. Each text is situated in a particular cultural context in a very unique fashion but at the same time is also autonomous in terms of its representative possibilities. And we should look at the text not just as something which is over-determined by the contextual legacy, but also something which stands on its own right as a piece of literature, which is why the literariness of the text must always be factored in with very careful consideration. So, with that, we end things for the part. I hope it was a useful session for you. The last few sessions on the novel will now move on to a new text in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.