

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Week – 10

Lecture 50

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel Unchained. We just finished reading Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart. So, from this particular session, we will start looking at Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel, Nervous Conditions. Now, because we are doing these two novels together, Things Fall Apart and Nervous Conditions, it makes sense to study one essay and it is a really fantastic essay which should be on your screen by Alison Searle which really compares the two novels in terms of the colonial conditions and in particular with reference to the role of the mission, the Christian mission as a political spiritual enterprise. and how it really corresponds to the very complex ecology of identity iterations and reformations in a colonial contact zone. So this essay by Searle really looks at the two novels together which is why we selected it because we are looking at these two novels together in a sort of a comparatist way and what is important for us to understand is to look at how both these novels offer us really excellent fictional representations of human rights, abuse of human rights and the entire politics of territorialization, the politics of identity appropriation and all these associated machineries which take place during colonialism.

But if you remember, when we read Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart we also tangentially refer to some of the interviews of Achebe where he is very careful to articulate the complexity of the colonial historical process and he is also equally careful not to romanticize or reify the pre-colonial past as some kind of a perfect flawless you know landscape a space of time, a point of time, right, because he is also very careful to articulate the many positives which accidentally or otherwise took place during the era of

colonization, right. So like all historical processes, colonization or the colonial mission was a very complex ambivalent engine which produced, deproduced and reproduced many sort of entanglement if you will, of precarity and possibilities. It created a lot of precarious conditions. It created a lot of brutalities and tragedies and grotesque human rights abuse. But at the same time, sometimes accidentally, sometimes intentionally, it also created possibilities of elevation, possibilities of upliftment, possibilities of progress which hitherto were not imaginable in those landscapes, in those cultural topographies. Now this essay looks at the role of missions in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions* and it is important for us to look at how the two novels compare with each other but also contrast with each other and establish some kind of a dialogic relationship with each other because the settings are very different. As you know *Things Fall Apart* belongs to Nigeria. of the 50s and then of course, we have *I mean earlier* and but look at something no longer at ease and it comes back to the 50s and 60s, but *things fall apart* is obviously when the imperial missionaries coming in at the turn of the century. Whereas, *Nervous Conditions* is in Zimbabwe and the perspectives are also different because in *Nervous Conditions* by Dangaremba, we have a female focal point, the feminist focal point which obviously complicates the post-colonial retelling as well.

And some of you who have done my course on trauma and literature would also remember how I use this text *Nervous Conditions* as a study of trauma fiction right. It is an excellent novel really to look at trauma in terms of how you know it becomes a very complex condition which is produced by political conditions, produced by psychological conditions and that The interface between psychology, politics and embodiment really is the triangulation if you will is really crucial and vital for us in terms of understanding the traumatic condition of the colonized subject, the female subject in this particular case who was more often than not doubly marginalized which is something we find in Danga Rambha's novel. Now let us look at the essay and see how the two novels compare with each other and most importantly how this kind of a comparatist understanding or sort of textual, intertextual understanding and reading is helpful for us particularly in a course like this, the *Novel and Change* which looks at really at a very fundamental level the relationship between text and context. In other words, looking at how texts are reflective

of cultural context, but at the same time, how texts create possibilities out of cultural context, imaginative possibilities, anticipatory possibilities and so on and so forth. In other words, we are looking at fiction both as acts, an act of representation of reality, but at the same time also as an act of anticipating alternate realities or futuristic realities.

So the role of missions in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Condition* by Alison Searle. You have the abstract in front of you on your screen, which reads like this. Both Chinua Achebe and Tsitsi Dangaremba explore the role of Christian mission in the narratives *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*. The imperative of Christian mission raises the question of how universal truth claims are applied to the particulars of a given culture and locality. While Achebe examines the cataclysmic effect of early missions upon the entire Igbo culture and the manner of life, Dangaremba enters the historical discourses concerning Africa at a later moment and considers the role of an institutionalized missionary organization in Zimbabwe at more familial and personal levels.

So, at the very outset, and this is also a very good example, a very good template for you about how to write a good academic article. Now what this article sets out to do is compare the two novels but at the very outset it also outlines the differences, historical differences, political differences, geopolitical differences. I mean one is in Nigeria, one is in Zimbabwe, obviously very different cultural topographies but also, they inhabit different dichronic moments apropos of colonial history because when you look at *Things Fall Apart* it is Twentieth century novel. where the imperial engines are about to come, the imperial apparatus is about to sort of very coercively set itself on indigenous populations, indigenous landscapes. Whereas, when we come to something like *Nervous Conditions*, much later novel about a much later condition, a much later society, we find how the institutionalized missionary is always already there and operative not just at a macro public level, but also in very intimate personal level.

So, it enters the familial territory, the domestic territory, the domestic designs, right. So, at the very outset, the differences are there. So, when it comes to the Achebe novel, the missionary presence is more of a public space presence, is more of an outsider presence,

more of an elsewhere presence, an alien presence, which is obviously aspiring to get more and more institutionalized and powerful. But when it comes to the Dangaremba novel, it is already established as a very quotidian daily experiential reality, right. So, the missionary presence is not something out there in the public space, but something which is very much part of the dailiness of life, part of the atomic lived reality, a very granular everyday banal levels, which is why we find the missionary presence in nervous conditions is more familial and personal, which is what Alison Searle also establishes at the very outset. Missionaries are central to the directives of both Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and the more recently published *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangaremba. There are numerous literary texts that portray the influence of missions and their impact in a post-colonial environment. So now we know if we study colonization at a very historical level, you find that the missionary presence or the Christian presence was very, very pervasive during almost in all acts of colonization. The missionaries traveled sometimes before the traders, sometimes after the traders, and set up these missionary machines really which converted people, which wanted to sort of historically wanted to bring in a different religion, wanted to sort of you know and it was part of a territorializing process at a spiritual level, right. Obviously, it was very complex and an argument can be made somewhat successfully that you know this was in very close collusion sometimes with the political enterprise.

So, the missionary presence often operated as a soft power of the colonial machinery in terms of how they were setting up these conversion programs, setting up these epistemic programs in order to attract people psychologically into the folds and make them more less subversive in other words because that act of conversion or act of missionary you know circulation was also an act of erasure in some sense. Think of the early example that we studied *Robinson Crusoe* when Crusoe quote-unquote rescues Friday from the cannibals, the first thing he does he converts Friday into a Christian which is to say he erases any erstwhile identity Friday may have had and sort of gives him or imposes a different identity at a sort of a cultural level. So, Friday is sort of baptized into a Christian and that becomes the moment of the birth of the subject in a sense. And of course, what that does at a political, psychological level is it makes Friday into some kind of a subservient subject. He will never be subversive because he is someone who thinks he has benefited from the spiritual

kindness of Christianity as a missionary enterprise. Now structurally the effects of mission in Igbo land and Zimbabwe can be traced in the fact that these authors both choose to write in English that again we talked about this how both Achebe and now we find Dangaremba also the choice of language becomes important because that obviously is part of the postcolonial process that they are writing back using the language of the colonizer. largely a consequence for the drive for literacy and education initiated by missionaries, often in collaboration with the British Imperial Administration. So, this collaboration slash collusion is something that we have to really take into account that the education drive or the literacy drive was obviously from our cultural perspective because it is obviously assuming there was no literacy before the Imperial engines arrived which is a very flawed assumption as you all know. So essentially what this means is it was an erasure of the earth-wide earlier templates of education and literacy and an imposition and a territorialization of the new templates of literacy which were brought in in close collaboration and collusion with the administrative engines of the empire. Christian mission by its very definition biblically is a cross-cultural enterprise and thus raises many matters that are of crucial concern to post-colonial literatures and theory, right.

So the presence of the Christian mission is obviously very cross-cultural because as you know if you look at the history of Christianity, it started off as a Middle Eastern religion and the Romans brought it back to Europe really and of course it travelled back to many parts outside of Europe with the later empires such as the British Empire and so it has had a very interesting cross-cultural journey really. It was a very cross-cultural enterprise from the moment, from the place, the site in which it was born to the site it was consolidated and the site there was you know, later connected back to Christianity, right. So, the different kinds of missions, the different kinds of travel that Christianity experienced and almost always at the hands of some political missions. So, it was always in very close collaboration with the politics of travel and of course the imperial engines. So, most profoundly it confronts one with issues of truth and morality, how the universal claims of Christianity are to be applied to the particulars of a given culture and locality, right. So, again there is a tension over here that like almost all religions Christianity also comes with offers is quote unquote universal truths or universal claims of spirituality, goodness, morality, kindness

and so on and so forth. But the interesting thing for the missionary perspective over here is how it connects and collaborates and establishes a dialogic relationship really with the local cultures and a local you know reality, the local languages, local rites, local rituals. So you find that whenever there is a contact zone a cross-cultural contact zone, the Christian missionaries or Christian missionary enterprise really takes up interesting dimensions because it absorbs a lot of the local cultures and that's how it consolidates. religious imperative of mission with its eschatological reconfiguration of temporal existence offers a different perspective on the colonial encounter to most contemporary theories. So eschatological is that which is related to time, the sort of end of time or the dimension of time really.

And Christianity obviously with this entire narrative of the Judgement Day and the end of time, it is profoundly eschatological in quality. So, it has sort of a temporal understanding of creation and destruction. But it offers a very different perspective when it comes to the colonial encounters because obviously it is then interacting and sometimes conflicting with local religions, local rituals and the interesting thing over here is to study how both novels give us this sort of fabula as it were in terms of how Christianity gets reconfigured in different cross-cultural locations. Now, this tends to construct the central issues in terms of in terms of self-agency, politics, subjection and power, failing to effectively incorporate the spiritual, affective and transcendental dimensions of the missionary endeavor. So, herein lies the tension over here that on the one hand as per the rule book, as per the spiritual templates of Christianity, it is transcendental in quality, spiritual in quality, affective in quality, but what really happens in the colonial encounters in a colonial cross-cultural dialogues is that the spiritual transcendental dimensions they take a back seat and what comes to the fore really are questions related to self-agency, politics, subjection and power. So, Christianity becomes one more instrument in a colonial contact zone to really consolidate and territorialize power really and territorialize identity a powerful identity, a protected identity in relation to subjection and you know erasure of agency, right. So, agency becomes really a complicated issue when it comes to the colonial Christian missions because the way the missionary machines operated during that time in Nigeria as well as in Zimbabwe, although differently. It really required an erasure of earlier identities,

earlier forms of agency, earlier forms of subject formations or subject iterations which were then replaced by new forms, counterparts which were new representations and new versions of the same. Now what that meant was the priority then became more of a collusive collaboration with power, politics and different forms of control and less about spirituality, less about transcendence, less about you know claims to kindness and you know the big grand narratives of universal truth. Now, Achebe's depiction of mission in *Things Fall Apart* exposes elements that are often ignored or misinterpreted, rendering his text a necessary supplement to critical discussion.

Dangaremba is more attentive to the social and psychological effects of cultural imperialism on individuals, especially women. the ideological positioning of a novel that makes it particularly amenable to the matrix of theoretical discourses constituting postcolonial studies, right. So Dangaremba that novel *Nervous Conditions* is really a postcolonial classic in many ways because it does many things but the two important things it does it talks about first of all the effect of colonization, the effect of colonial education, the effect of colonial knowledge templates, epistemic templates and how it really creates a very complex ambivalent condition whereby there is both precarity and possibility, there is both subjugation and possibilities of emancipation, right. So both operate in very asymmetric ways. Now the other important thing that Dangarambha does is to look at how or what happens to female agency, the doubly marginalized female subject at times of colonial cohesion, at times of colonial territorialization, right and that makes it even more complex at many levels not least the level of the interface between psychology and politics. Anglican missionaries are absent throughout much of the novel *Things Fall Apart*. The story unfolds during the period when Britain was in the process of colonizing. So that's why I said if you look at *No Longer at Ease* and *Things Fall Apart*, they are very dialogic with each other because they are diachronically related to each other. So, *Things Fall Apart* is a setting up of the colonial mission and *No Longer at Ease* which is the sort of a sequel to the novel. It is very much a later edition of the novel.

It, sort of talks about, there is a biological kinship, we talked about how the grandson of Wacom Q is the protagonist and *No Longer at Ease* and so on and so forth. For the Achebe

novel, *Things Fall Apart* is about the formative phase of colonization where the African territories allotted to it at the Berlin Conference of 1884, 1885. So, you know where the distribution of Africa really and you can understand how crude it sounds really, but that is exactly how it happened. There was a Berlin Conference and allotment of territories took place and Britain was in a process of colonizing, you know. So, basically taking up the territories conferred to Britain and then obviously uh you know colonizing it using all kinds of power the hot power as well as soft power focuses *Things Fall Apart*, it focuses on the Igbo people who inhabit the territory of south-southeastern Nigeria on either side of the river Niger. Now, if you remember in the earlier session, we talked about how knowledge became a tool of power in *Things Fall Apart*. Of course, the district commissioner is writing a book about the subjugation, how to subjugate and pacify the tribes of lower Niger, right. So, again look at how problematic the language is. how offensive the language is. But the entire enterprise is to find a method or describe and declare a method which can be passed on to posterity in terms of how to subjugate, how to pacify these tribes of the lower Niger, just so subsequent administrators have it easier than the predecessors.

But the novel is about the Igbo people who inhabit the territory in southeastern Nigeria. Now Achebe deliberately attempts to reconstruct or construct a variegated, unsentimental and empathetic image of Igbo life prior to the personal contact with white missionaries, English culture and imperialism. So, there is a sort of before and after quality about the novel that we have discussed already but what is important for us to understand is how unsentimental the depiction is, which is what makes it such a great novel because it really does not try to sentimentalize the pre-colonial past. But it just gives a complex material historical picture of what transpired and then of course the moment where the missionaries come in, the moment where the imperial engines come in and the processes of change, slow as well as eventual abrupt changes that took place subsequent to the arrival of imperialism. He notes Achebe, I would be quite satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers that their past was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them, right. So, this is the mission of Achebe really, a very political mission as you can imagine, basically rescuing the Africans, the subsequent generations of Africans in Nigeria from this internalized idea, internalized of course by the missionary

machines, by the imperial machines. There was one long dark savage night. before the imperial apparatus arrived, which is obviously a very manipulative way to discuss and describe history right and history writing as we all know is a very political process, a textual process and very manipulative process but that was obviously the grand narrative. which the imperial missionaries were trying to propagate. Before the imperial missionaries arrived, before the missionary machines arrived, there was one long night of savagery and debauchery and all kinds of regressive customs from which the imperial agents rescued Africa, right.

And of course, that narrative has to be stopped, that narrative has to be refuted. And that seems to be the project of Achebe where he says that, you know, I teach my readers that their past was just as complex, just as ambivalent, just as rich and enlightening as any culture's past and not as one sort of unending form of darkness, a blanket of darkness as imperial historians would lead us to believe. The mission is nevertheless implicitly present throughout the novel due to its decision to use the English language. Now Achebe's own education in English was attained at a missionary school and its potential to reach a worldwide linguistic community is a consequence of the imperialist ventures of the British Empire, right. So again we can see how the empire created and this is what Achebe himself said earlier, we discussed it also when we read *Things Fall Apart* in more details, how the entire imperial presence, the colonial presence with its interplay of hard power and soft power, interplay of coercion and benevolence apparently, it also created possibilities of emancipation, possibilities of outreach, possibilities of growth and development which were almost impossible to imagine earlier. As an individual shaped by two distinctive cultures, Achebe appreciates the nuance and diverse nature of the colonial encounter, which arrogantly imposed and destroyed, but also opened opportunities and provided certain benefits. Now I just want to pause here for a moment and really reflect on this sentence because it is a very important sentence for us to understand that it is absolutely true that imperial machinery, the imperial engines and institutions and the soft power around it, education, religion etc. It destroyed cultures. It completely eradicated culture, sometimes violently, physically, but also at a psychological level.

It really erased the earlier forms of identity iterations, earlier rituals, and so on and so forth. That is absolutely correct. Historically, I mean, it is unequivocally true, which is why the language here is very clear. It arrogantly imposed and destroyed. But at the same time, sometimes accidentally and sometimes intentionally, it also opened opportunities and provided certain benefits. And this is why I think reading fiction is very, very helpful, because fiction is obviously an asymmetric entanglement of historical reality with imaginative possibilities. In other words, it is a combination of what really happened with what did not happen and what could have happened right and sometimes it mixes up even further and really highlights what should have happened right. So all these different focal possibilities, all these different imaginative possibilities are mixed up with historical reality which is why fiction is so effective in quality because it also gives you the, you know, the picture of possibilities, it really gives you the portrayal of what could have taken place, right, what should have taken place and what did not take place. It is once a very fine medium, fiction, in my mind, to articulate absences, what did not happen, the silences, the erasures, the elisions, all those that did not get into the chronicles of history, right, which is why fiction is also subversive in quality, right, so which is why novels get banned more often than history books do. So, this entire complexity of precarity, impossibility, this entire ambivalent attitude towards colonization and the colonial context is really represented and reconstructed in great works of fiction and of course reading two together we have *Things Fall Apart* and *Dangaremba's Nervous Condition*.

So, Achebe is important because both as a chronicler of his culture as well as a writer of great authority in craft, he is very careful to appropriate and espouse a very nuanced perspective on colonization. He does not invent, or perpetuate simplistic dualisms and his text really benefits, reveals important distinctions that characterize different missionaries like Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith, right. So, again this is what makes Achebe's novel so important and so legacy oriented because it really gives us a picture, very complex picture of historical reality. It gives us different representations, different embodiments of missionaries and it is important for us to understand the missionary presence as it begins to get formalized and things fall apart. The relationship between the Anglican missionaries

and the advancement of colonial government is not assumed to be hegemonic or unproblematic, despite Mr. Brown's admission that the head of the church is my church is in England. Most controversially, perhaps, Achebe demonstrates the ways in which the Igbo people chose to participate in the changing order of things. So again, the question of choice becomes important and I think it's a little simplistic and reductionist to look at choice in a colonial contact zone only resting with a colonizer and entirely absent from the colonized. It's more complex, it's more fluid than that, right, and Achebe demonstrates that in his fiction as well. Rigid opposition is not celebrated, despite the tragic frameworks of the plot. As the most prominent and inflexible member of the clan, Okonkwo ends up destroying himself in violation of the sacred laws of his people. And we talked about this extensively, how Okonkwo's suicide is both an act of resistance as well as an act of surrender or submission.

But at the bottom of it all, at the fundamental level really, it's an act of violation of the moral-spiritual code of the Igbo people. So, you find how the different courts compare and contrast and sometimes conflict with each other and this very complex ecology of values, very complex ecology of moral values you know political values and identity values and of course how that produces different forms of identity iterations which you find happening in things fall apart and later of course in a nervous condition. So we will stop at this point today and we will continue reading this essay in the subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.