

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Lecture 51**

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 2

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We were looking at Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel Nervous Condition in relation to the novel we stopped or we finished reading already which is Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. So this particular essay is really a comparison of the two novels in terms of how they engage fictionally with the relationship of the missionary presence in the colonial contact zone. So this should be on your screen. So, we talked about in the last session if you remember how the missionary presence is important and it is so differently represented in two novels because they obviously belong to two different points of time. The Achebe novel is the formative phase of colonization in Nigeria, whereas the Dangaremba novel Nervous Condition is a much later geopolitical climate in Zimbabwe but it is important to see how Achebe and we sort of looking back on Achebe a little bit to understand what happens in Dangaremba, Dangaremba's novel as well. But it is important for us to see how the relationship with the missionary presence, the political presence is done and in a really deconstructive way and things fall apart. And this should be on your screen. So, Things Fall Apart can be construed as a groundbreaking attempt to write back to the dominant and exclusive imperial narratives of history ironically echoed and deconstructed by Achebe in the final paragraph of the novel, right.

So, we talked about the different endings of the Achebe novel and how deconstructive and almost postmodern his novel is in that sense. His narrative, although oppositional, is conceived in positive rather than apologetic or victimized terms from the perspective of the of the colonized Igbo culture. So, it is not really a victim narrative in that sense. It is actually

much more complex than that. The literary artifact that results is by unavoidable historical necessity a hybrid product. But Achebe subtly and successfully attempts to capture the communal dimension of oral narrative within the literary constraints of an alien language, right. look at the way in which the orality of knowledge formation, the orality of knowledge circulation in Igbo culture is captured and embedded even within, sort of nested within, shall we say, of the colonizer's language which happens to be English. So, despite the fact that he is writing in English, his novel is in English, Achebe successfully integrates the oral tradition, the affective dimension of orality in *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, when white people first appear in the story, they are seen as albinos. So again, the focal point is very interesting because they appear as albinos, you know, from the perspective of the non-white presence, the Nigerian presence. Instead of figuring as venturesome explorers encountering strange and exotic customs, the Europeans are shown from an African perspective as potentially inexplicable aberrations from normal standards of reference, which is a humorous deconstruction of their own generally complacent self-perception. So, the switch of the focal points, which we talked about already in terms of how the different endings can be studied really gets a lot of momentum in Achebe's representation right. So, there is this African perspective from which the Europeans look ridiculous, they look very much out of shape, the skin looks different and the alterity is produced from that particular focal point which is obviously undercutting the Eurocentric notion of you know the perfect body, perfect appearance and so on and so forth. So, it's deconstructing the complacency of the Europeans. The decision of the Abam clan to put a white explorer to death while not given unqualified authorial endorsement is rendered explicable.

Instead of being an act of unthinking savagery, the Abam elders are shown to have consulted the Oracle. which told them that a strange man would break the clan and spread destruction among them. Other white men were on the way. They were locusts. Okonkwo's disdain for their chosen course of action illustrates that the African response to imperial culture was not uniform and simplistic description that fits the Achebe novel best. It is non-simplistic. There is no monolithic representation of one kind of Africanness, the different kinds, the different versions of African identity which is very, very historically true and that heterogeneity, that polyphony of representations and identity iterations is what makes

Things Fall Apart a really interesting and complex novel which is why it enjoys the legacy it does today. And the focus switching, the focal switching is very, very important in terms of who is doing the representing, who is doing the gazing, the perspective or the gaze at the perspective of the storyteller and also the perspective of the actor, I mean the one acting out or carrying out the action. So, the different switch of perspectives or the swapping of perspectives is really what makes a novel very, very complex from a point of view study. Just as the Europeans had certain images of the African continent and peoples before an actual physical encounter, Achebe shows that a complex of different ideas and rumours were circulating among the Igbo before they met the missionary. So, there is this presupposition operative even within the Igbo culture in terms of the white man's presence, in terms of how the white man looks and behaves and appears, right. So, there is presupposition on both sides. There were echoes of a distant government being established by white men near the coast, and more ominously, there was the story of a bloody reprisal enacted upon the Agambe one mark a day for the murder of the white explorer with the iron horse. Achebe scrupulously creates a sense of a rich and coherent social fabric that has formed its own ideas about whites and their culture.

So, again, the idea formation is very important. Just want to pause for a minute over here because it's important for us. study how ideas are produced politically in a colonial context zone because ideas are manipulated, they are produced, they are manufactured, they are circulated often through lots of political inequalities and political asymmetries and the fault lines of power, the fault lines of presupposition are exactly how ideas operate right which is why there is amplification, there is exoticization, there is excessive formation and also the attribution of monstrosity, the attribution of excess, the attribution of violence, all these operate level of ideas right. So, ideas become obviously non-innocuous, profoundly non-innocuous in the colonial contact zone. because they are mediated through rays, through bodies, through different forms of otherness. So, ideas about whites and their culture. So you know this operates as a crucial background informing the reception of the first white missionary amongst the Igbo people. Even before the whites arrived there was this idea about whiteness among the Igbo people. So instead of gazing through the eyes of the European, the text displaces the assumptions of imperial narratives. It is a very interesting

and very dexterous displacement shall we say, you know very wonderfully done, very complexly done how the idea of gaze is displaced and transferred over to the non-white eye, non-white focal point and that creates sometimes comedy, sometimes irony but it creates a sort of cognitive cultural complexity which is why *Things Fall Apart* becomes such a great novel.

And it grants the terms of reference and mediating perspective, but they usually suppress other. This was a revolutionary artistic strategy when Achebe first published the novel in the 1950s and has had incalculable political and literary ramifications. So this is what I meant when I said the legacy of *Things Fall Apart* is absolutely immense. It has had a huge impact, an enormous impact really in terms of how the post-colonial novel was written and the canon of the post-colonial novel, Achebe's novel really gains a very high point, a very high rank in that particular school, that particular trend and style of writing. The arrival of Mr. Brown and Banta is positioned within the seasonal patterns that regulated the Igbo census time and place. The harvest was over and it was a time of year when everybody was at home. So again, look at the way in which temporality is defined and described in Achebe's novel because obviously this was the, this was a metric system that was at play. The time of the harvest, the time of being at home, this is how time markers were defined and designated. It is leisure who may partially explain the degree of interest and attention that his presence generated. The differences between the Igbo people themselves were registered humorously in the interpreter's inadvertent use of my buttocks when referring to himself. So, again, there is a lot of irony, a lot of comedy. which is created in Achebe's novel and again that that requires a huge amount of self-reflexivity and craft because he is weaving in many kinds of representation registers. There is an oral tradition of representation and of course, it is nested within a big macro form of representation which is the English novel right, the postmodern English novel. Nevertheless, dialogue is established between the three groups as the universal message of the Gospel is proclaimed and discussed.

Again, Achebe carefully depicts the variety of responses that a white man and Igbo missionaries received. Derisive laughter, indifference, and the charge of madness, attentive

listening and on the part of Noé a deep captivation. So, look at the different cognitive registers which are created, there is derision, there is subversion, there is insult, there is a charge of madness and of course there is also attentive listening and this character Noé a deep captivation. So, there is seduction as well as subversion, there is derision as well as you know glorification, right, there is absorption as well as rejection. So, all kinds of you know cognitive responses are created in this very complex ecology of response that is then described when the colonial missionaries first come and this is described in a passage as well. It was a poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. So, the viscosity of the knowledge, the embodied quality of this knowledge transmission is also described. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul. The question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ekamfuna who was killed he felt a relief within as a hymn poured into his parched soul, right. So, again look at the viscosity, the corporeality of description over here. So, it is a new spiritual system, a new faith narrative pouring in, almost like trickling over. and you can feel it in the marrow, you can feel it in the bones, you can feel it in a very embodied corporeal way and that embedded embodied quality is very important because this is how the internalization process is happening, right. So we can see how the missionary presence and the new vocabulary of spirituality, the new template of mysticism creates not just a political impact but also a deep almost neural impact, right and this is why the politics and the psychology bit really intertwine with each other. The reception of the missionaries and the message is rendered intelligible and shown to be a discerning, individually informed and variegated process of exchange and assimilation, right. So again exchange, assimilation, information they all become intertwined with each other, entangled with each other in cognitive, visceral as well as political ways.

And this passage is important because and the description over here, it also shows how the colonial education template, how the colonial spiritual missionary template actually operated. It really aimed for the affective, it really aimed for the visceral, for the embodied, for the corporeal, just so it gets in the body, it gets in the nerves, it gets in the tissues of the subject. and the implant is so deep and so visceral and so embodied that any possibility of questioning or subversion would disappear really, right. So this is also a form of erasure,

this implantation of a new spiritual vocabulary, this implantation of a new cultural vocabulary, mystic vocabulary is also accompanied by erasure, right because it is also erasing away the earlier templates of knowledge, the earlier templates of religion and so on and so forth. Now Alan Levin has suggested that Achebe is attempting a transvaluation of values in Nietzschean terms, seeking to denaturalize and discredit Christianity in favour of the master of masculine values of traditional Igbo culture. So, that reading is also there but you know that can also be validated as well as refuted, right. So, this masculine pre-Christian religion is laughing or frowning at the more effective Christian vocabularies. That's the reading that Alan Levin has suggested. However, this thesis does not appear to correlate with a deliberately even-handed and self-effacing narrative strategy employed in the text. Now, Achebe does not simply dismiss the missionaries as a crass and ignorant agents of an imperial nor does he perpetrate the master narratives of inevitable progress so deeply entrenched with the 19th century Victorian culture, which assumed the mystical union of British civilization and Christianity.

So, this is why the novel is so ambivalent, that is so polyphonic in quality, because it doesn't really take up a simplistic stance whether political or spiritual in terms of establishing a binary of savage and civilized, powerful and powerless, oppressor and oppressed. It does not do that. It really in a way it wants to deconstruct this very dualistic notion of power in a colonial context zone which is why the representation of the missionary, the description of missionary in this particular novel is so complex, so ambivalent, right. So, there is obviously the idea that they are coming to really erase the erstwhile cultures of faith and religion. But at the same time there is also genuine enchantment, there is also genuine captivation without question that is happening in the novel as well. So, rather Achebe seems to be attempting to recapture and dramatize the contingent nature of impossibilities inherent within the historical moment of encounter between these two very different cultures and religion. Now, this is where I think the fault lines become really important for us to highlight. because obviously these are very different cultural topographies, very different vocabularies of vision and religion, spirituality and what we are seeing over here is a mixture of the two, some kind of an entanglement, intertwining happening between two very different cultures. Consentious, responsible

narrator, storyteller, Achebe is very careful and very sensitive to the differences of the two cultures. So, he does not really mix it up together in a very neat and uncritical way, nor does it take a value position, nor does it take a simplistic valiancy position saying well you know the Christian missionaries are evil people and the earlier religious tribes and religious faith systems are the noblest, purest people on the earth.

So, he does not do that at all. no value judgment happening over here, there is no hierarchy and you know neat description of values happening at any level in a Chavis novel. Instead, what we see is looking at historical acts or historical processes as a contingent activity, sometimes accidental, sometimes intentional, sometimes manipulative, sometimes well-intentioned, right. So, this entire ecology of agency and activity in Achebe's novel is extremely complex and extremely polyphonic in quality, which is why he helps us highlight really the role of fiction as a unique medium of representation of power inequality, of contact zones, of different kinds of transmissions and exchanges a level of knowledge. and spirituality and so on and so forth. But the important thing here is the difference, the difference between two cultures is highlighted and not erased away, not glossed over through some kind of a neat power paradigm, right. So, that does not happen and things fall apart. A continuum is established on the basis of their shared humanity, which prevents them from being completely alien to each other. So, Noé had questions that could not be answered within a traditional framework of Igbo culture that were met by the Ministry of Missionaries. concerning the brittleness of an unrelentingly masculine code of behavior, the exposure of twins, the sacrifice of his beloved friend Ikemefuna and a dry hunger in his soul, right. So, there are questions which paradoxically were addressed by the Christian missionaries better than the earlier templates of religion and spirituality. So, there is a character called Noé in the novel who finds himself captivated and themselves captivated by the Christian missionary presence because you know they seem to answer the questions you know more complexly than the kind of answers they had got earlier. So similarly, Mr. Brown discovered through his conversations with Akuna that there was in the Igbo religion a certain structural affinity with the Christian message he sought to proclaim. So, there are discoveries, accidental discoveries, laborious, meticulous, intention discoveries which happen in this cross-cultural exchange through religion. So, we can see

how this is a classic example, a very powerful example, a compelling example, shall we say, of the relationship between novel and change, because here we have a fictional text which is representing Cthulhuian slow changes in the social moral fabric of a geopolitical condition which is characterized by the arrival of an other, at the same time a gradual assimilation as well as conflict with the local presence.

So, it becomes a classic case of novel and change because the fictional framework gives the very interesting medium through which this change can be both accommodated as well as articulated, right. So, there is affinity that is discovered with the Christian mission and the religious principles of the Igbo tribe. At the same time there is a character called Noe who finds that a Christian missionary seemed to answer his questions better than what he had responded or received from his cultural counterparts, his cultural kins at the religious levels in Igbo culture. Andrew Walls observes that whether in Igbo land or Northumbria Christianity is first accepted in terms of the traditional worldview, but that a new element has a dynamic of its own that enters deeply into the existing system and interacts with it. Now this is the important bit with which we will end today. That idea that interactive cultures become important, interactive identities become important and what we do not have is some kind of a binary or dualism. But rather things fall apart as well as a nervous condition offer an interactive framework through which the complexity of power dynamics and identity iterations may be studied with a lot of nuance which is entirely the unique relevance of fiction in terms of understanding political, social, cultural changes. So I stop at this point today. I will continue with this essay in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.