

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 53

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart - Part 4

Hi and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We are looking at a comparative study of Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe and Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel Nervous Conditions. In particular we are looking at the role of the mission, the Christian mission or the missionary presence in the two novels and how we can compare and contrast the presence in very interesting ways also because of the geopolitical differences which are part of setting in the two novels. So this should be on your screen. So we just had a preliminary discussion in terms of how the Christian missionary presence operates in Things Fall Apart in terms of two characters, the two missionary people who are there and how the differences in the two different points of time are also dramatized. We now shift our focus in terms of how the same is operative in Nervous Conditions. So, Nervous Conditions focuses on the role of the mission in the education of Tambudzai, right. So, Tambudzai of course is one of the main characters in the novel and then of course her education is part of the growing up and part of the focal lens that she assumes. We talked about this a little bit, but now it is important for us to re-emphasize and re-read this in some details. So, however, the relationship between the missionaries who were almost the only whites present within a narrative and a family was first established a generation earlier through her uncle, Baba Mukuru, right.

So, again, Baba Mukuru is a very important figure because when we compare nervous conditions with things fall apart, it's also an intergenerational difference. Because Tambudzai, of course, belongs to the post-colonial generation in Zimbabwe, whereas Babamukuru is closer to that point, let's say, when Okonkwo and things fall apart where

Okonkwo inhabits. Right, so the intergenerational differences are also important for us to sort of highlight. Because even within a novel, even within a particular kinship structure, the relationship between the story and society will depend largely on the kind of position, the kind of diachronic point that a character is inhabiting. So, her grandmother used to proudly relate how he was determined from a young age to achieve great things. His potential was observed by the missionaries who arranged for him to go to secondary school, enabling him to gain a scholarship to South Africa. So again, this is what I mentioned. Similarities between Babamukuru and Okonkwo are quite interesting. Of course, there are differences, but there are also the element of potential, the element of heroism, the element of becoming extraordinary and how those elements correspond to the colonial presence especially apropos of the presence of the Christian missionaries. This was essential to his subsequent advancement within the colonial structure and his own community.

His participation in these two patriarchal hierarchies dovetailing neatly. Baba Mukuru also sought to improve the status of his family. He was continually frustrated in this by the indolent lifestyle of his younger brother, Jeremiah. His vision of the future demanded an investment in the education of first his nephew, Namu, and when he died, in his niece, Tamburzai. is a really interesting character, is protagonist of course in the novel *Nervous Condition* but Tambudzai also inhabits that intergenerational moment when the colonial is about to become the post-colonial and how the post-colonial can also enable a rewriting not just in a macro public space writing back to the empire, writing back to the colonizer but also writing in a very intra-familial space writing back to the patriarchal presence within the family, which operated with or without the colonial presence. So, in that sense, it is a double writing back and I mentioned this already how Dangaremba's novel is really radical because of two primary things. One is obviously it's representing the doubly marginalized perspective of the female, the colonized, the post-colonial female subject. And the second thing is the traumatic conditions, the nervous conditions, the psychological conditions in Dangaremba's novels do not necessarily require an approval or a certification or a mediation of through public macromarkers, but rather they operate also through micromarkers, through granular quotidian domestic spaces, which is what makes this novel

more radical in many ways. So it was a mission that provided him with this long-term perspective. It granted the finances that allowed him and his wife to study in England.

His secure infrastructure created his job as a headmaster of a local school, an academic director of the church's manacle and region, right. So again, the idea of the director, I mean all these are the post-colonial positions, professional positions which opened up. So we can see how There is a fundamental difference shall we say between Achebe's representation of the colonial missionary presence and Dangaramba's representation the same. Because of course they are talking about two different geopolitical contexts and two different dichronic contexts, right. temporal spatial differences are to be highlighted. The mission thus set the agenda for and became the central mechanism through which the social, moral and educational status of the extended family could be achieved, right. So the mission became some type of galvanizing force over here which corresponded to different kinds of social, moral, financial, educational status. It offered opportunities, it offered different forms of upliftment and emancipation. in a post-colonial context. Now of course we have seen already at the very outset how the operation, the ontology as well as the operation of the mission were in many ways complexly collusive to you know the imperial engines, the sort of the epistemic engines of the empire, the administrative engines of the empire and so on and so forth. So therein lies the ambivalent location of the missionary position, the missionary presence in this novel and also in Things fall APart. So this is a quotation which corroborates his point, especially in relation to how, you know, Baba Mukuru's ascent socially, Baba Mukuru's, you know, procurement of professional positions or appropriation of different kinds of professional positions were contingent on his success through the mission, through the Christian mission, right, which offered him scholarship, which offered him different kinds of emancipatory possibilities. And this is a quotation from the novel. Consciously, I thought my direction was clear. I was being educated. When I had been educated, I would find a job and settle down to it. Carrying on in the time that was available before, I was married into a new home. Baba Mukuru's great work of developing the family issues were well defined for me at that time. These were the goals and this was how we would reach them. Baba Mukuru was my touchstone which showed me that this was true.

So again, this is what I meant when I said this particular passage really corroborates Baba Mukuru's ascent because he now serves as a touchstone to subsequent generation. And how, you know, especially in relation to Tambudzai's, you know, aspiration towards the future or, you know, desires for a certain kind of future, Babamukuro becomes the template in many ways, a touchstone in many ways of the success that is possible if one struggled hard, if one studied hard and became something very different from the ancestors, from the earlier templates which were possible. Now the complication here of course is the gender angle which comes in because this is where Nervous Condition becomes a really radical novel because it really gives you the intersectionality shall we say between the colonial presence and the gender presence and how Tambudzai's, you know, turmoils and, you know, psychological problems and conditions were also because of her location as a female subject, not just as a colonized subject. So because that is more complicated, the female position, the female subject position adds another layer of oppression, adds another layer of marginalization from which she operates, from which she articulates. And that is a layer that, you know, Dangaremba articulates and highlights and dramatizes very very complexly. So, in many respects the position of Baba Mukuru as a patriarchal authority and head of the family in the Shona culture was consolidated, supplemented and extended by his involvement in the British mission. So, we can see how so the patriarchy of Baba Mukuru is in a very interesting way consolidated by his exposure, by his approval and by his success through the colonial missionary presence. So the missionary presence consolidates in many ways the earth-wide patriarchal structures and Baba Mukuru becomes the ultimate touchstone, the ultimate benchmark of emancipation, the ultimate benchmark of success, right. But at the same time he becomes this absolute authority as a patriarchal figure whose patriarchal presence, his patriarchal power and impact not just in the family but also in the Shona culture is consolidated by his success apropos of the colonial missionary institution. He was able to gain a tertiary education in England. So again, all these different, become the markers in a post-colonial landscape, the markers of success, the markers of aspiration, the markers of liberation.

So, he was able to gain a tertiary education in England, which translated into economic

privilege and social prestige when he returned to Rhodesia, right. So again, this transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe is important, because this was erstwhile Rhodesia and coming back to Rhodesia after having acquired English British education obviously was a huge prestige, was a huge privilege and that really gave him layers and layers of social privilege and prestige and acceptability. to the point of consolidating his patriarchal power. His wife, Maiguru, however, was restricted to the position of a low-paid teacher. Her meagre salary financed gifts of food to her husband's family, thus reinforcing his reputation as a man of power and material largesse. So, this is where the novel becomes really complicated because we see that all the good things seem to come to Baba Makuru only and he seems to be the ultimate beneficiary of the colonial missionary presence. I mean to the extent of going to England, getting an education, tertiary education, but at the same time that immediately uplifts them and dramatically puts them up in the map of social acceptability and prestige. Whereas his wife, my guru, was conveniently relegated to a position of, you know, marginalization where she just works as a low paid school teacher. her salary is almost entirely used and invested into buying gifts and generous gifts for her husband's family which in turn further consolidates Baba Mukuru's image as a generous patriarchal giver, right. So, we can see how patriarchy appropriates different kinds of, of indigenous patriarchal model, appropriates different forms, colonial administration, colonial institutions in order to really enhance itself, in order to further consolidate itself, right.

So that just becomes one of the many ways in which this novel really dramatizes difference, dramatizes consolidation, dramatizes different forms of oppression and hierarchization. The aura of a foreign education when combined with the generous distribution of goods was a potent mix that granted Babamukuru extraordinary authority and influence within the network of his extended family, right. So there is that legacy, that big muscle which comes with colonial education you know and education in England and of course he combined that with the generosity which he conveniently uses his wife's salary for. So together they really create this massive image of Baba Mukuru as his grand patriarch, the giver of generous gifts, the decision maker, some kind of a God image has been created over here. And what is interesting is how the indigenous identity over here gets really calibrated through different kinds of colonial markets, not least through markers

of education, through markers of a university degree, through markers of prestige, right. His involvement with the mission at times created complications that undercut his authority and estranged his family from Shona society. So, there is that really ambivalent location which is to be highlighted as well where on the one hand his proximity and his kinship with the colonial missionary establishment and institution obviously gave him tickets to success, tickets to prestige, tickets to different forms of social glamour. at the same time it also often undermined, undercut its authority within the Shona society, right. Because there is this element of mistrust which is also there about the colonial mission or the missionary presence which is obviously collusive with the colonial administration, right. So, there is emancipation, there is also mistrust.

So, the heart of nervous conditions as is the case with *Things Fall Apart* it's a very ambivalent activity which is associated with colonial machines really, whether benevolent machines or machines of oppression, machines of outright oppressions. But there is this ambivalence which is always at play. So, Tambudzai's mother, for example, was devastated and embittered by the death of her son and the increasing alienation of her daughter, which she knew resulted from Baba Mukuru's plans for the social improvement of her family, right. So again, Baba Mukuru operates in a God position which is conferred to him by his colonial exposure and you know different kinds of degrees that he has got and of course a return to the Ashwana society and the other thing being his generosity, his supposed generosity which is actually his wife's money that he almost entirely usurps. But this also creates complications because that projects certain kinds of future actions to other subjects in his family, which in a way really foregrounds the questions of agency, questions of ethics, and questions of loyalty and subservience and different kinds of hierarchical notions of kinship. Similarly, his own children, Neasha and Shido, were unwilling to speak in the Shona language upon their return from England, feeling acutely the distinctions between the two environments. So, language, of course, becomes a very important issue here. We talked about how even at a meta level, the very fact that both Achebe and Dungaremba chose to write in English is a sort of political choice, is a political decision. And that enables them historically to reach out to a wider audience and again, inhabit that ambivalent zone whereby they can resist and rewrite and write back better, more importantly. At the same

time, we're also being collusive to the global industry of capitalist consumption where English operates as the most important language for literacy, for literature, for fiction writing and the entire industry around all these you know cultural formations.

So that ambivalence is obviously there. Now Babamukuro is challenged by his competing system of allegiances. He needs to maintain the trust of the missionaries, yet compromising his traditional obligations as an African male threatened his own personal sense of identity. So, at the heart of both the novels along with security, along with agency, along with ambivalence is a question of identity, right. So, what kind of identity is created, de-created and re-created.

Now, when we talk about identity, the two big, you know, principles, the two big vectors, the two big verticals that are often associated with identity are questions of aspiration and questions of anxiety. So, every identity can become aspirational in quality, every identity can become anxious in quality, can produce its own economy of anxiety and aspiration. So that complication, that problematization of identity is highlighted again. with Baba Mukuru's exposure and appropriation of as well as by the colonial missionary presence which consolidates as well as undercuts his authority as the African male. So as Tambudzai partly observes women feel a strain of this ambivalence with a more poignant even physical intimacy right. Now the term that I want to use at this point is a term called intercorporeality right. Intercorporeality of course is a relationship between bodies right. So many bodies put together, many human feeling subjects put together and how bodies interact with each other. Now connected with intercorporeality is a question of inter-effectivity, right. So how different forms of affect, different forms of sentimental structures are created, de-created and re-created when bodies come together. Now this creates the intimate economy or the economy of intimacy which is operated within a particular family, right, within a particular household and which is what, and I mentioned this already, really makes this novel very, very interesting because we are not really looking at public space markers or monumental markers of you know trauma or alienation or agency or aspiration and all the rest of it but rather we are looking at the intimate markets of domesticity of furniture of you know small rooms and the household as a site through which these different agents of anxiety and

aspiration may be played and replayed. They carefully establish contrasts between Tambudzai and her cousin illustrate the variegated forms these cultural complexities could assume. Nyasha benefited directly from her father's involvement with the mission. She enjoyed an unusual degree of material prosperity. She was educated with the children of missionaries at a school they had founded.

She had the opportunity to travel. So, all these different liberatory, emancipatory opportunities opened up for her, for Nyasha. She developed an acute faculty for critical analysis a transcultural approach to morality that finds expression in our attitudes to dress, gender relations and personal accountability. Now, this is why you find if you look at the vocabulary over here, there are these public political markers. Obviously, this is a post-colonial novel and there is a spectral legacy of colonization always there in the background. But what is interesting is to see how that particular legacy, how the particular baggage or spectrality gets played out and performed through markers such as dress, gender relations and personal accountability. So, again the very careful avoidance of public monumental markers and instead looking at the domestic intimate markers through which these discursive designs get played out, which is what makes *Nervous Conditions* such a refreshingly radical novel from a feminist perspective. So Nyasha is extremely affronted, for example, by the duplicitous way her parents respond to inquiries about Lady Chatterley's lover. So, Lady Chatterley's lover is a very important subtext in the novel in many ways because along with many other things that novel by D. H. Lawrence is also about transgression, societal transgression, right, sexual transgression, but more societal rather than sexual because there is this class war at heart of Lady Chatterley's lover, right, and there is this question of the duplicity, the hypocrisy that Nyasha finds her parents exhibiting when it comes to responding to that text. So, the scene powerfully exemplifies the juxtaposition of competing moral priorities. Now, at a meta level, it is also true that Nyasha, this entire mental makeup of Nyasha and the reason why she is questioning her family, her parents and finding them hypocritical and duplicitous is because of her exposure to D.H. Lawrence, which is only possible through the colonial missionary presence, right? So that is a kind of epistemic apparatus that she is exposed to, she has access to and so on and so forth.

So, there is that epistemic exposure that enables her to call out the hypocrisy of her parents. Surasin powerfully exemplifies the juxtaposition of competing moral priorities. For while Nyasha's insistence on personal honesty and individual freedom reflect the same commitment to personal enterprise and Christian values that Baba Mukuru imbibed through his own hard-earned and ambitious ascend to social prominence, the transgressive sexuality of the novel renders it affronting to him and does not fit with his preoccupations or preconceptions of womanly decorum. So, this is where you find the colonial education quote unquote gone wrong. Because it also, to the point that it gives emancipation, gives accountability, but still is subservient to the ultimate patriarchal structure, then it's wonderful. But the moment it begins to question the patriarchal structures at a fundamental level, then it becomes a problem. So, in a very paradoxical way, the problem caused by the colonial education is also because of its success. It is because you know these books, these novels, these texts which are now accessible to people like Nyasha are also creating these troublesome questions, these really you know deconstructive questions about morality, about gender, about sexual agency and so on and so forth and that in a very direct way is deconstructing some of the fundamental tenets of patriarchy in Dangaremba's novel, right. So, Baba Mukuru fears that Nyasha's preference for western dress and behaviours including her determined outspokenness will compromise his reputation as an upright gentleman, right. So, again notice how Baba Mukuru's gentle manliness is also contingent on how the woman in his family behave, right.

So, the woman obviously supposed to toe the line of his patriarchal fantasies. They are supposed to really stay within the permissible patriarchal folds and anything outside of that is seen as transgressive and problematic which is why the subtext of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is so important over here because that too is a novel about transgression where the sexual and social intersect with each other in very similar ways that is about to happen in Dangaremba's novel. So, this becomes a compromise of Babamukuru's aspired identity as a gentleman, as an upright morally correct virtuous gentleman. Somewhat ironically the potential implications of the mission that enabled it you know the potential implications of the educated resistance threatened to undermine the original benefaction of the mission that

enabled it. So, this is the irony and a paradox over here that you know just the original education mission becomes perhaps too successful, in the sense that it now creates these transgressive opportunities or transgressive situations which can come back and deconstruct the very process which created it in the first place. So, Nyasha faces the same tensions that confront her father, but far more directly due to her and gender, she is not prepared to make the accommodations she observes her mother to be perpetually engaged in. So, we find how the intergenerational femininity over here gets really played out in a very dramatic way. Because Nyasha wants to move away from the confines and the sacrifices and the behaviour, the social, moral location of her mother. Because she considers that to be regressive. She considers that to be an absolute lost opportunity, right.

So, she wants to move away from it and paradoxically the colonial education enables her or gives her the vocabulary to at least enact and embody that departure, that desired departure her body becomes the site of resistance between herself and her father. She is Fanon's native par excellence, physically decimated by the nervous conditions that he posits as a central and destructive element in the psychology of the colonized. So Franz Fanon, obviously, one of the biggest names in history. postcolonial studies who also embodies this very interesting collusion or entanglement of psychiatry and political conditions. So, she you know becomes Nyasha becomes that Fanon figure really in the sense that Fanon describes the decolonial figure as someone who is obviously always very neurotic in quality, always already engaged in a nervous condition of oppression and oppression comes from different institutional systems where it just gets in the bones, the cells, the neurons and it begins to affect the social moral behavior right. So Nyasha over here becomes the classic embodiment of Thanos native who is always already in a neurotic condition, always already you know decimated or controlled by a nervous condition which is obviously part of the psychological mental damage which is done to the colonized. As Danga Remba makes clear, it is the intersection of the educational opportunities provided by the mission with the patriarchal elements of Shona culture that makes the suffering so acute. So, among other things, this is also novel about intersectionality, right. So, the intersections between the educational opportunities which come with the colonized, the colonizing mission, the Christian missionary presence. At the same time, how those

become collusive with the erstwhile patriarchal elements of Shona culture and sometimes they are incompatible.

What, you know, someone like Nyasha accesses or learns or internalizes or, you know, has exposure to and what she faces in terms of oppression at home, the absolute incompatibility sometimes makes her suffering so acute, so unbearable, right. So you find how the colonial mission over here of the or the institution of the mission, the Christian mission of the colonized or the colonizer really becomes some kind of a ambivalent apparatus which can on the one hand emancipate the subject but at the same time it can also consolidate and reinforce some of the regressive you know patriarchal structures which were very operative before the colonized and the colonizing engines emerged in that particular landscape. So, we stop at this point today where we begin to see hopefully how the different intersections of gender, race, sexuality politics of course, they all come together to create this really moving image of marginalization, of neurosis, of this absolute mental decimation that Dangaremba is offering in the fictional framework over here. So, we stop at this point. Now we will continue with the reading in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.