

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #08
Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (II)

Hello and welcome back, to this course on, Postcolonial literature. Today, we will continue with our, exploration of Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart, which we have already started discussing, in our previous lecture. And, if you remember, in our last meeting, we talked about, how Achebe's novel helps us, look at the Colonial encounter, from an African perspective. And, it does so, by acquainting us with the intimate details of the life, of an African Village community in Nigeria.

Now, compared to Conrad's novel, Heart of Darkness, which we did earlier, and where we look at the African Village life, from the perspective of a European outsider. In Achebe's Things Fall Apart, we are able to switch our position, and become an inside to whom, even the most frenzied Village scenes, do not look like the incomprehensible activities of a madhouse, as it did to Marlow, if you remember. In fact, every action fits sensibly, within a coherent worldview, in Things Fall Apart.

And, the beauty of Achebe's novel is, how swiftly it manages to convey this worldview to the reader, and lend it a sense of cultural thickness. And, one of the effects, that this switching of our position as readers in Achebe's novel, viz a viz, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, is at the Colonial encounter, reveals itself, in a whole new light to us. Take for instance, the scene in Chapter 16, in Things Fall Apart, which describes the arrival of a European Christian Missionary in the Village of Umuofia.

Now, by the time, the scene is introduced in the novel, the readers have already gone over pages and pages of thick descriptions by Achebe, describing minute details of various rituals and customs, which form part of the religious life of the African Clan. Now, this means that, by the time, we reached the scene describing the arrival of the European Missionary, the African religious world has become so familiar to us readers, that we have started accepting it as the norm.

Which means that, we are readily able to sympathise, with the Africans of the Umuofia Village, when they can neither make head nor tail, of the new religion of Christianity, that the white man brings along with him. And, we share the confoundedness of the Villages of Umuofia, when they are confronted with something wish to them, is as bizarre as the concept of trinity, for instance.

Now, and if you place *Things Fall Apart*, against *Heart of Darkness*, we realise that ironically, with this switch in our perspective, the incomprehensible mad African world of Conrad's novel, ceases to be abnormal. And, it is the Europeans world, that starts looking bizarre, and even mad. However, before we proceed any further with the novel, let us go through the plot of the novel.

And, but here, I should say that, I will not summarise the story of the novel, for which, you need to go to the novel, and you need to read it. And, I am sure that, it will be a very rewarding experience. But, what I am going to put forward today, is a few salient plot points, which we will use to map this novel, and to discuss this novel. Now, these plot points are arranged chronologically, in the sense that, they are arranged in the way, that they occur in the novel, in the narrative.

And, the narrative of the novel, in terms of time, is pretty straightforward. There are not many flashbacks, or things like that. So, it is pretty straightforward. It flows unidirectionally, almost throughout the novel. But, I have also tried, while listing these plot points chronologically, I have also tried to introduce a thematic pattern, into these points. And, I have divided the points, into three main thematic groups.

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Introducing Okonkwo

- **Okonkwo**, the son of **Unoka**, is a celebrated member of the Umuofia clan who is known for his wrestling abilities
- **Okonkwo** has a large family with a number of wives and children which also includes the teenage boy **Ikemefuna** who was gifted by a neighbouring tribe to settle a dispute

So, if you look at this first one, as the title of this slide tells you, this is about introducing the character, Okonkwo. Okonkwo is a Protagonist of Achebe's novel. And, he is a celebrated member of the Umuofia clan. And, the whole plot is actually, an unfolding of the life and of the career, of this central character. So, I have, as you can see, I have listed a few points, under this thematic heading of introducing, Okonkwo. And, we will come to each of these points, later. So, you do not have to worry about them, just now.

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Okonkwo's Transgressions

- **Okonkwo** beats up his youngest wife during the sacred week of peace.
- **Okonkwo** kills **Ikemefuna**
- **Okonkwo** accidentally kills the son of his clansman **Ogbuefi Ezeudu** during Ezeudu's funeral and is exiled from his village

The next Thematic Division aims to discuss the various Transgressions, that Okonkwo commits. And, this in fact, forms the very meet of the novel. And, now here, I have listed three points, under the heading, Okonkwo's Transgressions. And, as you can see, each of these three points, list a murder, or an attempted murder, committed by the Protagonist Okonkwo.

So again, as with the previous slide, we will come back to each of these points, later. And, by the way, if you have not noticed, please note that, the words written in bold letters, in all of these slides that I will be presenting today, are names of characters in the novel. So, please take note of that, and take special care, in remembering these characters.

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Okonkwo and the Conflict with the Europeans

- **Okonkwo's son Nwoye** joins the Christian missionaries
- Conflict with the Christian missionaries leads to the arrest and humiliation of the Umuofia leaders
- **Okonkwo** kills a court messenger
- **Okonkwo** commits suicide

Now, moving on to the third slide, here I talk about the effects of the European Colonial incursion with the African society, and Okonkwo's engagement with these effects. And, it is from this last slide, that I want to start my discussion today. And, I will then be gradually backtracking, to the earliest slides. So, in this slide, as you can see, the first point, that I have listed here is that, Nwoye, who is one of Okonkwo's sons, he joins the Christian Missionaries.

Now, the implication of this action will become clearer, as we go along. But, for now, we just need to note that, near about the midway in the novel, we are told that a Christian Missionary has arrived in Umuofia Village. Now here, I would like to clarify a point, that though I keep referring to the Village society of Umuofia, and though even while reading the novel, you will come across the phrase, the Village of Umuofia. Umuofia, is actually the name of a Clan, in the novel.

A Clan, which belongs to the Igbo tribe. And, this Clan inhabits not one, but 9 different Villages. But, these 9 different Villages are nevertheless, geographically and culturally, very closely interlinked, and well knit together. So, when I am referring to Umuofia, I am actually

referring to this entire Village community. And here, you should also note that, there are different names given to these 9 Villages.

And, the two important names are that of Iguedo, which is Okonkwo's own home Village. And, later on, if you read the novel, you will see that, Okonkwo gets exiled from his home Village. And, he then, moves to the home Village of his mother, which is Mbanta. so now, but coming back to the Missionary, who comes to Umoufia, to set up his Christian Church. his name is Mr Brown. And, though Mr Brown's agenda, is to convert Africans to Christianity, he avoids antagonising, the inhabitants of Umoufia.

And, he avoids going into any direct confrontation, with them. But, soon enough, Mr Brown dies, and he is replaced by another figure named, Reverant James Smith, who unlike Mr Brown, has a stricter outlook. And, he does not believe for instance, in putting up with the rituals and observances of the people of Umoufia, which he considers Un-Christian, and therefore barbaric, any whichway.

And, in this new vitiated atmosphere of conflict and confrontation, that Reverant Smith creates, a new Christian convert, an African, but converted to Christianity, who goes by the name of Enoch, he does something drastic. He goes to an annual fest, that is going on in Umoufia Village. And there, he performs an act of sacrilege. He humiliates, a representation of an ancestral spirit, which is a great humiliation, indeed.

And, in an act of revenge, the people of Umoufia, then burns down the house of Enoch, as well as the Church of Reverant Smith. And, by doing so, they bring out the conflict between the newly arrived Christians, and the Villages of Umoufia, out into the open. Now, the European District Commissioner, takes a very strong view of this awesome case.

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And, as the second point in this slide suggests, he arrests the Leaders of Umoufia, and humiliates them, by putting them in jail.

After the release of the Leaders, Okonkwo takes a decisive action, against this incursion of Colonial authority, into the traditional Village life. And, he kills, the Leader of the court messengers, who had come to the people of Umoufia, as representatives of the European District Administration. But, what Okonkwo fails to do, is he fails to enthuse his fellow

Villagers, to wage war against the white man's authority. And, finally, failing to do so, he commits suicide.

Now, this story, as I have just narrated it to you, might appear to be a tale of a great African warrior, engaged in a solitary fight, against Colonial oppression, to protect the dignity of his own people. But, this would be a simplistic reading of the narrative. Because, if we trace back the life and career of Okonkwo, and his previous engagement with his own community, and his own family, we will see that, Achebe paints a much more complex picture of the Colonial situation, and the subjugation and downfall of the Umoufian Village community.

Now, to understand this complex picture, I think, we should start at the very beginning, and try and understand the character of the Protagonist Okonkwo, better.

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Now, Okonkwo is introduced early in the novel, as the son of a person called, Unoka. Unoka, in turn, is introduced as a talented musician, but as a person, who is a coward, who is regarded as a coward, and who is also a spendthrift. And, he has debts, all over Umoufia.

Now, Okonkwo from his very childhood, feels ashamed about his father. And, his entire character, is in turn shaped by a desire, to separate himself, from the kind of identity, that his father has in Umoufia. And, to fashion himself, as an absolute contrast to his father, as someone who is physically strong and courageous, as against the cowardliness of his father. And, this physical strength, physical prowess, and manliness, courage, etcetera, these are precisely the virtues, that are also shown as, very highly respected by the Umoufian society, in general.

So, Okonkwo proves his prowess, by defeating, in a famous match, he defeats a wellknown wrestler, called the Cat.

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And, from then on, he rises to become one of the tallest Leaders of the Umoufia Clan, who supports a large family, with his wealth, and has a number of wives, and a number of children. Now, what is ironic however, is that this very physical prowess, which earns Okonkwo, so much respect within the Village society, also frequently brings him in conflict with the rules and customs of the Village community.

Having said this, I would also like to point out here, that Okonkwo never deliberately flouts any of the traditional regulations. But rather, his very attempt to exercise his physical strength, a Leader of the Village community, forces him to transgress the limits established by the Umoufian law. So, how does this happen.

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Let us look through, these instances of Okonkwo's Transgressions.

The first serious Transgression that Okonkwo commits is that, he mercilessly beats up his youngest wife, during the period of peace, in which the people of Umoufia, are ritually prohibited from committing any violence. Now, the reason for which Okonkwo beats his wife is because, he thinks that, his wife is neglecting her wifely duties. And indeed, within the Umoufian society, where masculine dominance and physical aggression, are highly prized.

Okonkwo is almost expected to chastise, and even perhaps beats his wife, for such negligence. But, this expectation, that as the man of the house, Okonkwo will keep a very tight leash on the women folk of the house, comes in conflict with the ritual prohibition, against committing violence, in the sacred week of peace.

And, it is this internal conflict, that is there within the society, which traps Okonkwo, and makes him commit a Transgression, even while actually abiding by the unwritten laws or expectations of the society. Now, this kind of contradiction, again undoes Okonkwo, when he kills his adopted son, Ikemefuna.

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And, he does that, to prove his courage. Now, Ikemefuna was gifted by another tribe to Umoufia, to avoid an inter-tribe conflict.

And, Okonkwo had raised Ikemefuna, as his own son. However, when a Village oracle commands that, Ikemefuna should be put to death. Not only does Okonkwo, not protest against this, but indeed, he does the deed himself. He himself kills Ikemefuna. And, by doing so, he again commits another Transgression. Because, the oracle had also asked Okonkwo, to keep away from the whole business, because he was like a father to Ikemefuna.

But, the reason that Okonkwo murders Ikemefuna is that, as I have already told you, he constantly is haunted by the fear, that others might think that, he is weak. Others might think

that, he is just like his father, who is a coward. And therefore, Okonkwo is always under this tremendous pressure, to prove his masculine prowess, by acting it out. By acting it out, by beating his wife, by killing his adopted son, or as in the third case, where his Transgression results in an accidental killing of a 16 year old son of a Clansman.

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And, he accidentally kills him by, when sort of his loaded gun, fires at the boy, and shoots him down. And, this loaded gun, which accidentally fires and kills the boy, acts as a perfect metaphor of Okonkwo, who also just like the loaded gun, acts as a loose cannon, throughout the novel, who is powerful. Yet, it is this very power, which makes Okonkwo, a destructive force, just like the gun.

Thus, when near the end of the novel, Okonkwo emerges as the person, who single-handedly attempts to wage war against the Coloniser. The scene is filled with irony. And, this is because, the reader perceives Okonkwo, both as a heroic figure, who shows the courage to stand up to the white man's coercion, as well as an antagonist, whose very presence is disruptive to the society, to which he belongs. So, Okonkwo, simultaneously emerges near the end of the novel, as a heroic figure, and as a villainous character.

So, as I have just said, it is the same figure of Okonkwo, who both tears apart his community, and who shows the potential to save it from the white man's oppression. Thus, as the reader realises, the Colonial subjugation of Africa, as Achebe depicts it, in this novel, is not the simplistic story of a strong European aggressor, conquering and subjugating the weak Africans.

The external force of the European Colonisers, represented here, through the figure of the District Commissioner, definitely plays a role in the downfall of Umoufia, and the subjugation of the Villagers. But, it is not the sole agent, which brings about, this course of action. As William Butler Yeats suggests in his poem, *The Second Coming*, from which, Achebe borrows the title of this novel, *Things Fall Apart* precisely because, the centre cannot hold them together.

And, the Clan of Umoufia falls because, Okonkwo, the man, who is at the centre of the community, fails to hold the people together. And, this failure is most evident, in the way he

beats, kills, and alienates, members of his own family. And here, I am not only talking about his youngest wife or Ikemefuna, who he kills, but also his son Nwoye, whom he constantly ill treats, because he is effeminate.

Again, Okonkwo applies that exaggerated standard of masculinity on to his son, and finds him lacking, finds him almost an equo of Okonkwo. So, he constantly ill treats Nwoye. And, this results in, Nwoye, ultimately leaving his father, and joining forces with the Christian Missionaries, to escape from the abuses of Okonkwo. Now, this brings us to a realisation that, Okonkwo, even before the other Villagers refused to stand by him, to fight the white man, has already become a defeated man.

A man from whom, even his son tries to escape, and become a Christian Missionary. But, and therefore, it does not really come as a surprise, when near the end of the novel, Okonkwo commits suicide, by hanging himself. However, in the last Chapter of Things Fall Apart, the focus moves from Okonkwo, to the District Commissioner, who arrives at Okonkwo's Village with armed men, to avenge the killing of his Court Messenger, whom Okonkwo, if you remember, had killed.

Of course, before the Commissioner arrives, Okonkwo has already committed suicide. And, the commissioner, does not manage to get hold of Okonkwo. But, he nevertheless, plans to devote a Chapter to Okonkwo, and to the incidents surrounding his suicide, in a book, that he has already started writing. And, Things Fall Apart, ends with the title of this book, that the Commissioner is writing.

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*The Pacification
of the
Primitive Tribes
of
Lower Niger*

And, the title of the book is, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*. And here, in this very last moment, Achebe masterfully brings together, two aspects of European Colonisation, that we have been discussing, throughout this course. The first aspect is of course, that of military force and military coercion, which is represented by the armed guards, who come with the District Commissioner. But, there is of course another aspect to Colonialism, which is the aspect of Colonial Discourse.

And, that aspect is represented by this unfinished book of the Commissioner. And, like any Colonial Discourse, this use of the Colonial Discourse also, tries to translate the Colonial oppression and coercion, to look like a civilising Mission.

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And, this is evident even from the title of the book, where the Colonial oppression in Africa is rendered as Pacification.

And, the title also diminishes, the highly complex social structure of the Igbo community, which the novel has introduced us to, into the activities of a “Primitive Race”. A race, which is savage, barbaric, and not even fully human. And, as I have mentioned in my earlier lecture, it is precisely to counter this image of Africa and Africans, that Achebe took to write, *Things Fall Apart*.

So, with this, we come to an end of our discussion of Chinua Achebe, and his first novel. And, in the next lecture, we will start looking at Colonialism, and Postcolonialism, from within the Indian perspective. Thank you.