

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 insider 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, vis-à-vis Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is that 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 which 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 aren't 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 the 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 meat 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 mid-way 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 nine different villages. But these nine 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 nine 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 Umuofia 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 Umuofia.

And he avoids going into any direct confrontation with them. But soon enough, Mr Brown dies and he is replaced by another figure named Reverend 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 Umuofia which he considers un-Christian, and therefore barbaric, any which way.

And in this new vitiated atmosphere of conflict and confrontation that Reverend 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 Umuofia 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 Umuofia then burns down the house of Enoch as well as the church of Reverend Smith. And by doing so they bring out the conflict between the newly arrived Christians and the villages of Umuofia out into the open.

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Now the European district commissioner takes a very strong view of this arson case and as the second point in this slide suggests, he arrests the leaders of Umuofia 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 Umuofia 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 Umuofian 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 Umuofia. 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 Umuofia 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, et cetera, these are precisely the virtues that are also shown as very highly respected by the Umuofian society in general. So, Okonkwo proves his prowess by defeating in a famous match, he defeats a well known wrestler called the Cat.

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And from then on he rises to become one of the tallest leaders of the Umuofia 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 Umuofian 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 Umuofia, 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 Umuofian society where masculine dominance and physical aggression are highly prized, Okonkwo is almost expected to chastise and even perhaps beat 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 and he does that to prove his courage.

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Now Ikemefuna was gifted by another tribe to Umuofia 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 sixteen-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 Umuofia 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 Umuofia 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 echo of Unoka. 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.