

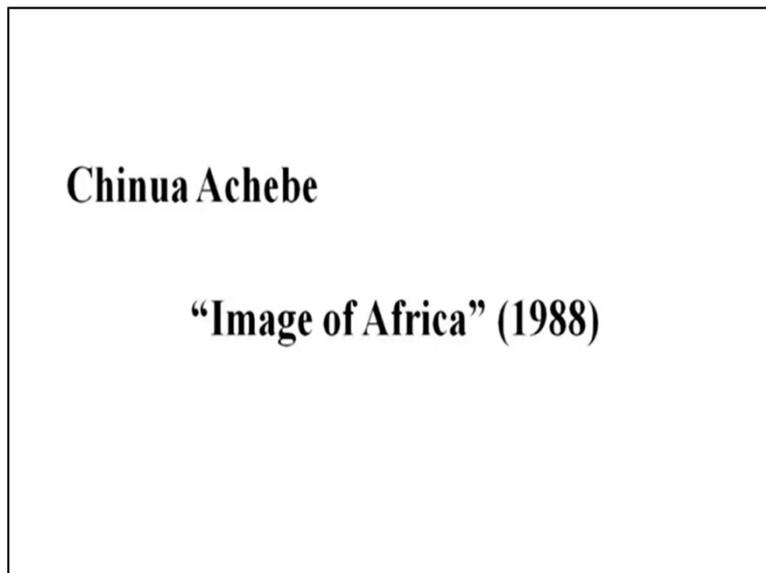
Postcolonial Literature  
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Lecture No. #09

Decolonisation and the Discourse of Nationalism : The Context of India

Welcome to another lecture on postcolonial literature. As I said in our previous meeting, that today we will start discussing postcolonialism from the Indian perspective. But before we start doing that, let us take up Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for one last time because I think that novel will help us connect with our discussion today better. Now usually when students read *Things Fall Apart*, especially after reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, like we have done and after reading Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, in his essay "The Image of Africa", they are left with a slight confusion.

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And the confusion tends primarily from the fact that, what they expect Achebe to do in the novel, especially after their reading of "Image of Africa" is, they expect Achebe to criticise European colonial oppression in Africa from an African's standpoint.

But as we have discussed in our previous lecture, when we read Achebe's novel, what you find is that in *Things Fall Apart* there is no simple condemnation of the European colonial authority. Colonial authority represented by the figure of the District Commissioner, if you

remember, who was also the author of the book *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*.

Now, instead, or rather on the contrary, what we see Achebe doing in his novel is, he is focusing primarily even on the fault lines that were already present within the precolonial Umuofian society. And as we have seen things fall apart in the novel, primarily because the central figure, who is Okonkwo, he cannot hold the community together. And he, as a centre of that community, fails, falters, and ultimately sort of, commits suicide.

Now, therefore in Achebe's novel, we see that the main preoccupation is not so much with the external pressures of colonialism, that does play a role in dismantling the society, but the primary focus is not that. The primary focus is on the precolonial society, African society, itself. And how certain very problematic fault lines exist already within the society which leads to its ultimate downfall under the pressure of colonialism.

But the question here is why does Achebe spend so much more time finding fault with the precolonial African society and its traditional practices than with portraying the violent intrusions of European colonisers who subjugated Africa? Now, to get an answer to this question we have to remember that though countering the colonial perspective as it appears in European novels like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might have been one of the reasons behind Achebe writing his novel, *Things Fall Apart* is however not just meant as an answer to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its portrayal of Africa. In other words, Achebe was not merely writing back to the West. Rather, he was also engaging with his fellow Africans and with his contemporary milieu with the novel. So we should remember that, though *Things Fall Apart* at one level is an attempt to counter the colonial discourse on Africa as it appears in novels like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it is not solely about that.

It is also about engaging with the fellow Africans and with the contemporary African milieu. So Achebe was not merely writing back to Conrad, he was also writing to engage with his fellow Africans. And what was that contemporary milieu within which this book was produced? Well, we should remember that *Things Fall Apart* was written during the 1950's. And anyone who is familiar with African history will know that this was the decade when agitations to gain independence from the European colonial rule was sweeping across the entire African subcontinent. Indeed, the year 1958, the year when *Things Fall Apart* was

published, was also the year when the motion for the Nigerian independence was passed and it was agreed that Nigeria will become an independent nation state from the 1st of October 1960.

So, as you can see *Things Fall Apart* was written not at a time when colonial forces were making fresh inroads in Africa. Rather, it was written at a time when the process of decolonisation was in progress. And in this milieu of decolonisation, when the Colonial structure was being discarded and Africans were searching for alternative ways of politically, socially, and culturally organising their lives, *Things Fall Apart* tried to take stock of the precolonial African society.

Now, in various parts of the once colonised world, to do away with the colonial structure often meant, or rather I should say, was often accompanied by a desire to revert back to a precolonial past which is again often assumed to be some sort of a golden age. Now, *Things Fall Apart* cautions against any such simplistic desire to revert back to the past by revealing the many fault lines and internal contradictions that plagued the African society even before it came under the corrupting influence of the European colonialism.

So, as I said earlier, things fall apart in the novel precisely because, the traditional centre of the African society, could not hold them together and what the novel seems to suggest therefore is that there is no easy way of going back to the precolonial past without thinking through the crisis that undermined it. And Achebe seems to be pointing out that the crisis was not merely external, there are many things wrong internally also within the precolonial society.

Now the reason I started today's discussion with *Things Fall Apart* is because it introduces us to a new set of concerns within the field of postcolonialism. So far in our discussion of the various literary texts we have concerned ourselves with the process of colonialism and with colonial discourse analysis. But as *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies, much of the literature that is today read under the banner of postcolonialism concerns itself with the process of decolonisation.

And in today's lecture this is going to be our main concern. We are going to look at the process of decolonisation through the Indian perspective. Now when I say the "Indian"

perspective, it is important to ask the question whose perspective or what is that perspective which I am identifying here as the Indian perspective? Now, one could have asked the same question while we were discussing the African perspective in our previous lecture but because the Indian context is more intimately familiar to us, I think this is the ideal time for us to pause and take a look at the very important question and try and understand the ramifications of this question. Now I think all of you will agree that qualifiers or adjectives like African or Indian are too vague to mean anything precise and that is primarily the case because of the immense social, cultural, economic diversities and variations that these qualifiers incorporates within themselves.

So, let us try to look at the adjective “Indian” more closely. And, this is important because for the next few lectures we will be using this qualifier very often. So, what does Indian mean? At least, what does Indian mean within the context of this series of lecture on Postcolonial literature? When I use the word Indian perspective on decolonisation, what I primarily mean is the perspective of the Indian middle class. Right. But again middle class is also a term which can mean different things to different people.

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### **The Indian Middle Class**

- In his book *Modern India 1885-1947*, Sumit Sarkar defines middle class as the new English-educated group of people who started emerging as a distinct section of the Indian society during the nineteenth century.
- This new middle-class, though it styled itself after the Western bourgeoisie, was almost entirely dissociated from the entrepreneurial business activities that typically formed the material basis of the bourgeoisie in the West.
- Rather they were primarily engaged in government employment or in professions like law, education, journalism and medicine for which their English education made them particularly well suited.

So let me clarify here that I base my understanding of the term middle class on Sumit Sarkar’s historical study titled *Modern India 1885-1947*. And in this book Sarkar defines a middle class. And I have sort of tried to divide that definition into these points. But this is how Sumit Sarkar defines middle class in his book. So, he says that middle class was the new English educated group of people who started emerging as a distinct section of the Indian society during the 19th century.

And then, commenting on the social roots of this new middle class, Sarkar observes that though this class styled itself after the bourgeoisie, who formed the middle class in the West, they were almost entirely dissociated from the entrepreneurial business activities that typically form the material basis of the bourgeoisie in the West. So, if they were not engaged in business, how can one classify themselves in terms of the occupation? Well, they were engaged in government employments.

Or, you could see the middle class engaged in professions like law, education, journalism, medicine, etcetera. And their English education made them eminently suitable to take up these government jobs as well as for these professions. Now, here to complete the socio-economic picture, I must also add that this newly emergent middle class also had some form of connections with land and a part of their income came from the land rent that they collected as petty landowners or small landlords.

And, well, during the 19th and early 20th century, it was perhaps only in Bombay that one could see some connection between the Indian middle class and business but we will need to remember that by and large big business in India under the colonial governance was directly controlled by the ruling Europeans. So, a large section of the Indians were not involved in big business under the colonial rule.

Now before I go into the reasons for choosing this particular section of the population to discuss the Indian perspective on decolonisation, I need to remind you that they were not the first group of people who came up with the idea of decolonisation in India. Indeed, much before the Indian middle class came into the picture there were other social groups like the tribals for instance or the peasants who were regularly agitating against the colonial rule in India.

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And indeed, there is this other book by Sumit Sarkar, the very readable book titled *“Popular” Movements and “Middle-Class” Leadership in Late Colonial India*, which beautifully explores these forms of anti-colonial agitations, which preceded the rise of the middle class and which continued even while the middle class started gaining prominence. But having said this I would still like to focus on the middle-class to study the Indian perspective on decolonisation primarily for these two reasons:

*“Popular” Movements  
and  
“Middle-Class” Leadership  
in  
Late Colonial India*  
Sumit Sarkar

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1. Middle-class anti-colonial discourse as a national discourse
2. Indian literature read under the category of postcolonialism is largely the literature produced by the middle class

The first reason is that it was the middle class who from around the late 19th century could forge an anti-colonial discourse which got accepted as the national discourse. In other words, the middle-class, while arguing against the colonial rule, could put themselves forward as representatives of the entire nation and they could convince the various other sections of the Indian population that the middle-class leadership represented the interests of all the factions of the Indian population.

And to understand this, you can actually perform a very simple experiment. So, just try and think of any major figure who emerged as a leader during the middle-class led anti-colonial struggle that started in India from the early 20th century. Any leader who played a prominent

role in the anti-colonial struggle from the early 20th century onwards. Now, chances are that the figures that you have thought belongs to the middle-class.

So, for instance, if you have thought of Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Bipin Chandra Pal, or C.R. Das or M.K. Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru or Subhash Chandra Bose, you would notice that they were all English educated and were involved in one kind of profession or other. Indeed, if you carefully go through this list of names that I have just read out, you will see that most of them were actually trained as barristers.

But, when you think about their engagement with the anti-colonial, in sort of Independence movement, you think of them as national leaders, as leaders who claimed to speak on behalf of the entire nation, the entire Indian population, rather than on behalf of, say, just the barristers or just the English educated middle-class. You do not think of them like that. Right. Now whether they were truly representative of the interests of all the sections of Indian population or not is a matter of debate, and indeed the literature available on this debate is voluminous.

But what is important to note here is that these representatives of the middle-class were able to forge a counter discourse to colonialism, which claimed to be the discourse of the nation. So, when we discuss the Indian perspective on decolonisation, we therefore will be actually discussing the perspective as presented through the nationalist discourse of anti-colonialism generated by the middle-class. Because it is only in this middle-class discourse that we first come across the notion of a nation speaking out against the colonial rule.

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The second reason for focusing on the middle-class is because the kind of Indian literature that gets studied under the category of Postcolonial literature remains predominantly the production of the middle class. And we will discuss this middle class bias as well as the attempts made within postcolonial studies to go beyond the narrow confines of the middle class and their concerns when we discuss subalternity later.

But for now, let us return to the discourse of nationalism which the middle-class created to counter the colonial discourse. Right. Now, the origin of the middle-class nationalist discourse can be traced back to the 19th century and the most important questions around

which this discourse crystallised were: 1. Why was India colonised? and 2. How can it become free again?

So, very simple, very basic questions but fundamental questions nevertheless around which the middle class generated this discourse of anti-colonial nationalism. Now by the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, thanks to the works of such European orientalists like William Jones for instance, H.T. Colebrooke, Nathaniel Halhed (these are names which I have already mentioned in my previous lecture, in one of my early lectures, if you remember), now thanks to them it was already established that the Indian language of Sanskrit shared a very strong affinity to the European classical languages like Greek and Latin. And for the Europeans this led to the assumption that some kind of civilizational affinity existed between classical Europe and classical India. Now in the colonial discourse, therefore, India unlike Africa was not outright dismissed as land of barbarians and savages.

It was not a dismissed because of this notion of affinity. If anything was related to the exalted classical age of the Greeks, for instance, then how can one dismiss it as a land of barbarians? Rather, the way the colonial argument was shaped was like this that India was once a civilised land but its people had now fallen from that grace and that is why they need the mature and enlightened guidance of the colonial authority to conduct their affairs.

And here, I think you can realise that we are back again to the idea of colonialism as a civilising mission. So, unlike Africa, India was regarded as a once civilised country, a once civilised land but clearly the level of civilisation from the European perspective had gone down. And that was the excuse which the Europeans used to say that, see, we are here to civilise or to re-civilise, in want of a better word, the Indians.

Now, in its early phase, the middle-class nationalist discourse readily adopted this idea of a golden past as well as the narrative of the fall from grace because that helped explain why India had become colonised in the first place. So, the middle class nationalists therefore argued that clearly India had started lacking some quality which they had possessed during the fabled golden age of the past, which was why the outsiders could come and colonise the land.

So far the early form of a middle class nationalist discourse and the colonial discourse was more or less in agreement. There was no major divergence. Where they started, where the colonial discourse and the middle-class nationalist discourse started diverging was the point where the early nationalists argued that it was possible to return back to that fabled golden past by rectifying the shortcomings that had led to the fall.

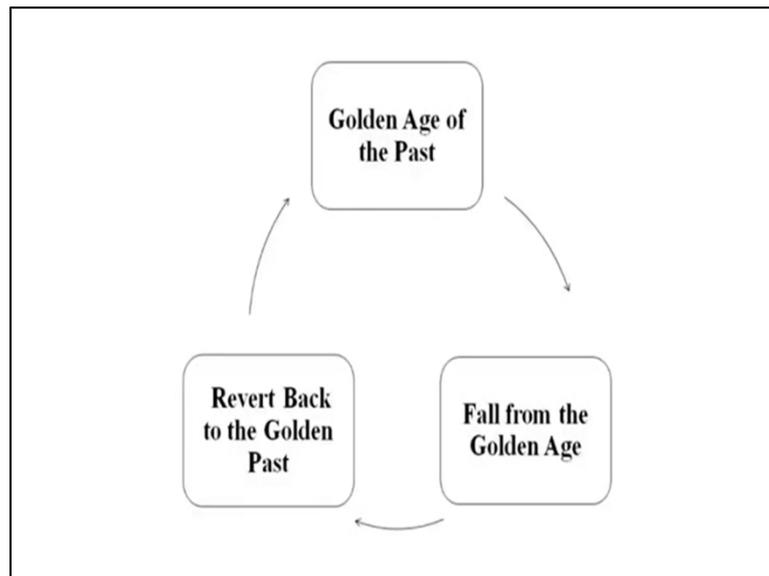
So as you can see here, in any movement towards decolonisation there exists a natural tendency to glorify the precolonial past and a desire to return to that fabled past. So when Chinua Achebe was writing about precolonial Africa in his *Things Fall Apart*, he was trying to make an argument precisely against this simplistic attempt to return to a fabled past as a solution for the present problems.

But as we shall see in our next few lectures, the conviction that a movement away from colonialism should mean a return to a golden past strongly underlined the middle-class nationalist discourse right from the 19th century down to the Gandhian era of the 20th century. However, we need to note two things here. Firstly, though the notion of a golden past remained mostly constant, different middle-class intellectuals conceived it differently.

Thus, if we trace the development of the Indian nationalist discourse from the 19th to the 20th century we will find in it differing opinions about what constitutes the golden age for instance, about the time when it ended, about the reasons which led to its demise and things like that. So, about the golden age there exists significant diversity within the national discourse.

The second thing that we should note is that if we study the nationalist discourse we can find in it diverging opinions about how Indians should recover themselves from the degenerate state that they are apparently in the present and how they should regain the golden age. Now, we will explore these differences more closely when we deal with individual literary texts but for now we should keep in mind the basic cyclical pattern:

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And, here you can see the pattern starts with the golden past and then it proceeds to the fall and then it loops back to the past through a future possibility of recovering the golden age. And this pattern remained more or less constant throughout the development of the nationalist discourse. So in our next lecture we will analyse this cyclical pattern more closely with reference to specific literary texts. Thank you.