

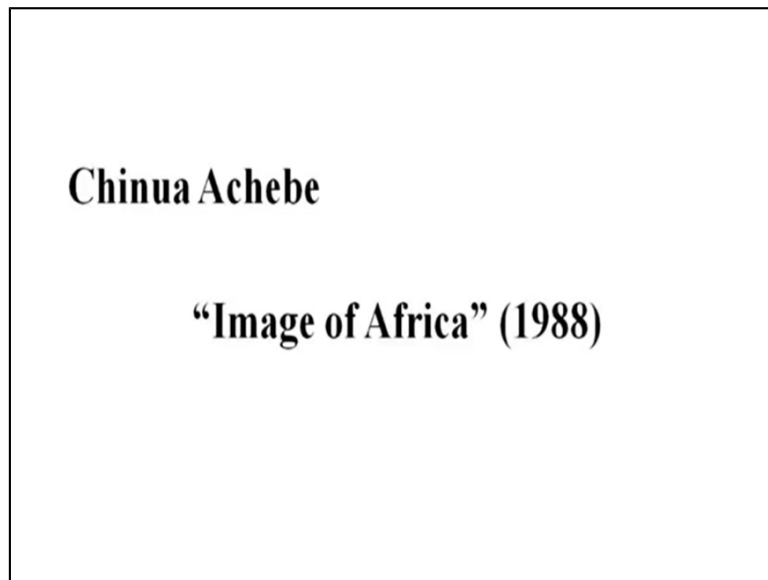
Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #09

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.

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And, after reading Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, in his essay, *The Image of Africa*, they are left with a slight confusion. 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 Africans 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 Umoufian 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, this, 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 to 1947*. And, in this book, Sarkar defines

a middle class. And, I have a 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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*“Popular” Movements
and
“Middle-Class” Leadership
in
Late Colonial India*
Sumit Sarkar

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 Anticolonial 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.

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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 Anticolonial 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 Anticolonial struggle, that started in India, from the early 20th century. Any leader, who played a prominent role, in the Anticolonial 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 Chander Paul, 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's, were actually trained as barristers.

But, when you think about their engagement with the Anticolonial, 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, one, why was India Colonised, and two, 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 Anticolonial 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 my 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. And, 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 it's 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.

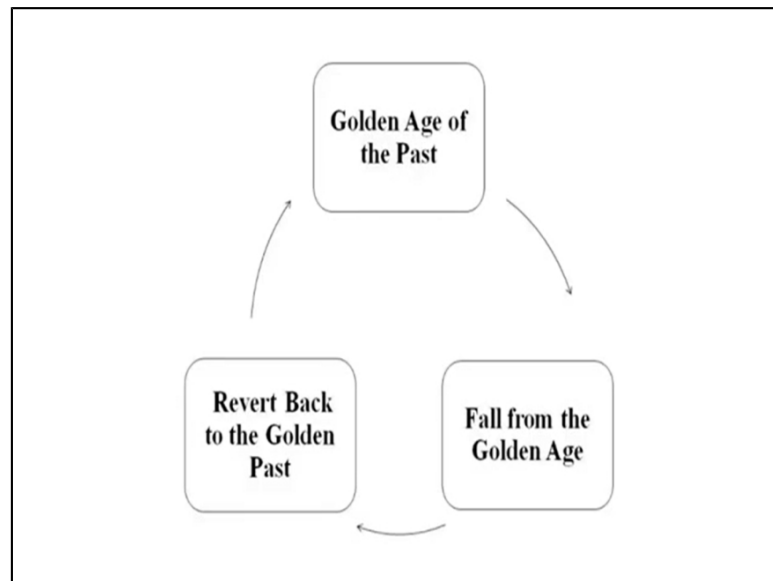
But, as we shall see in our next few Lectures, the conviction, that a movement away from Colonialism, should mean a return to a golden past, strongly underlined the middle class nationalist discourse, right from the 19th century, down to the Gandhian Era of the 20th century. However, we need to note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

Thus, if you 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.