

## Postcolonial Literature

### Lecture 9

**Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur**

Welcome to another lecture on Postcolonial Literature. As I said in our previous meeting, today we will be looking at 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 it will be able to connect us with today's discussion better. Now usually when students read *Things Fall Apart*, especially after reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness* in his essay "Image of Africa", they are left slightly confused. And this is because what they expect Achebe to do in the novel especially after their reading of "Image of Africa" is to criticise the European colonial oppression from an African's stand point. But as I pointed out in the previous lecture, what we actually find in *Things Fall Apart* is not a simple condemnation of the European colonial authority who is represented by the figure of the District Commissioner. On the contrary, in his novel, Achebe's primary focus is on the fault lines that were already present within the precolonial Umuofian society. And as we have seen, things fall apart in the novel not mainly because of the external pressures of colonialism but rather because the central figure of Okonkwo who cannot hold things together as the leader of his community.

But the question here is why does Achebe spend more time finding fault with the precolonial African society and its traditional practices than with portraying the violent incursion of European colonisers who subjugated the Africans? To get to the answer of this question we will have to remember that though countering the colonial perspective as it appears in novels like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might have been one of the reasons behind Achebe writing his novel, *Things Fall Apart* is not just meant as an answer to Conrad's portrayal of Africa. In

other words, Achebe was not merely writing back to the West, he was also engaging with his fellow Africans through his novels.

In this context we have to remember that *Things Fall Apart* was written in the 1950s, the decade when agitations to gain independence were sweeping across the entire African continent. Indeed, the year 1958 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 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1960. So as you can see *Things Fall Apart* was written not at a time when the colonial forces were making fresh inroads in Africa, but rather when the process of political 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, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* tried to take stock of the precolonial African society.

In various parts of the once colonised world, to do away with the colonial structure has often time been accompanied by a desire to revert back to a precolonial past which is assumed to be some sort of a golden age. *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 European colonialism. As I said earlier, things fall apart in the novel precisely because the traditional centre of the African society cannot hold them together and what the novel seems to suggest is that there is no easy way of going back to the precolonial past without thinking through the crises that undermined it.

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 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 processes of decolonisation. And in today's lecture our main concern will be precisely this – the process of decolonisation as viewed from the Indian perspective.

### **Middle-class**

Now when I say “Indian” perspective, it is important to ask the question what do I mean by Indian? Whose perspective do I qualify as the Indian perspective? One could have asked the same question when we were discussing the African perspective in our previous lecture but because the Indian context is more intimately familiar to us it will be easier for me to explore the possible implications of this question in our present lecture. Now I think you will agree that any such adjective like African or Indian is too vague because of the immense social economic and cultural diversification that it incorporates. So let's try to look at the qualifier “Indian” more closely. Well when I say Indian perspective on decolonisation, I primarily mean the perspective of the Indian middle class.

But middle class too is a term which can mean different things to different people. So let me clarify here that I base my understanding of the term on Sumit Sarkar's historical study titled *Modern India 1885-1947*. In this book 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. Commenting on the social roots of this new middle-class Sarkar observes that though it styled itself after the bourgeoisie who formed the middle class in the West, was almost entirely dissociated from the entrepreneurial business activities that typically formed the material basis of the bourgeoisie in the West. Rather, they were engaged in government employment or in professions like law, education, journalism and medicine for which their English education made them particularly well suited. Here to complete the socio-economic

picture I must also add that this newly emergent middle-class also had some form of connection with land and a part of their income was the rent that they collected as small landlords. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was perhaps only in Bombay that one could see some connection between the Indian middle-class and business but by and large we need to remember that under colonial governance, big business was directly controlled by the ruling Europeans.

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 to come up with the idea of decolonisation in India. Indeed, much before the Indian middle class came into the picture there were various other social groups like the tribals for instance or the peasants who were regularly agitating against the colonial regime and Sumit Sarkar's book *"Popular" Movements and "Middle-Class" Leadership in Late Colonial India* beautifully explores these forms of anti-colonial agitations which preceded the rise of the middle class. But having said this I still want to focus on the middle class to study the Indian perspective on decolonisation for two main reasons:

1. It was the middle class who from the late nineteenth century onwards could forge an anti-colonial discourse which got accepted as a 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 sections of the Indian population. To understand this, you can perform an easy experiment. Try and think of any major figure who emerged as a leader during the anticolonial struggle that started in India from the early twentieth century. Chances are that the figure that you have thought of 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 Subhas 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 the list you will see that most of them were trained as barristers. But when you think about their engagement with the anti-colonial movement you think of them as national leaders who claimed to speak on behalf of the entire Indian population rather than just on the behalf of barristers for instance or the English educated middle-class. Now whether they truly represented the interest of all the sections of Indian population or not is a matter of debate, and indeed the literature 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. When we discuss the Indian perspective on decolonisation therefore we will be actually discussing the perspective as presented through the nationalist discourse of anti-colonialism generated by the middle-class.

2. The second reason for focussing on the middle class is because the kind of Indian literature that gets studied under the banner of postcolonial literature remains predominantly the literature that has been produced by the middle class. We will discuss this middle class bias as well as the attempts made within postcolonial studies to go beyond the narrow confines of middle-class 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.

### **Golden Age**

The origin of the middle class nationalist discourse can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the most important questions around which this new discourse crystallised were 1. Why was India colonised? and 2. How can it become free again? Now by the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century thanks to the work of such European orientalist like William Jones, HT Colebrook and Nathaniel Halhed 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 this led to the assumption that some kind of civilizational affinity existed between classical Europe and classical India. In the colonial discourse, India unlike Africa was therefore not outright dismissed as a land of barbarians and primitive beasts. Rather the colonial argument was that India was once a civilized land but its people had now fallen from that grace which is why they needed the mature and enlightened guidance of the colonial authority to conduct their affairs. And here we are back again to the idea of colonialism as a civilising mission.

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. The middle class nationalists 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 middle-class nationalist discourse and the colonial discourse was more or less in agreement. Where they 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 downfall. 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. When Achebe was writing about the precolonial African society in *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 nineteenth century to the Gandhian era of the twentieth 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 nineteenth to the twentieth century we will find in it differing opinions about what constitutes the golden age, about the time it ended, and also about the reason for why it ended. The second thing to note is that if we study the nationalist discourse we find in it diverging opinions about how Indians should recover themselves from the degenerate state that they are in the present and how they should regain the golden age. 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: which starts the golden past, proceeds to the fall and then loops back to past through a future possibility of recovering the golden age. This pattern remained more or less constant throughout the development of the nationalist discourse. And in our next lecture we will analyse this cyclical pattern more closely with reference to specific literary texts. Thank you.