

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 08

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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 started discussing in our previous lecture. In our last meeting we talked about how Achebe's novel helps us look at the colonial encounter from an African perspective by acquainting us with the intimate details of the life of an African village community in Nigeria. Compared to Conrad's novel *Heart of darkness* 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. In fact every action fits sensibly within a coherent worldview, 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.

Encounter with the missionaries

One of the effects that this switching of our position as readers in Achebe's novel, vis-à-vis the novel *Heart of Darkness*, is that the colonial encounter reveals itself to us in a whole new light. Take for instance the scene in chapter sixteen of *Things Fall Apart* which describes the arrival of European Christian missionary in the village of Umuofia. By the time this scene is introduced in the novel, the readers have already gone through several pages in which Achebe has described in minute details the various rituals and customs which form part of the religious life of the African clan. This means that by the time we reach 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. Thus, we readily sympathise with the Africans

of the Umuofia village when they can make neither head nor tail of the new religion of Christianity that the white man brings with him. And if we place *Things Fall Apart* against *Heart of Darkness* we realise that ironically, with the switch of perspective, the incomprehensible mad African world of Conrad's novel ceases to be abnormal and it is the European's world that starts looking bizarre and mad.

Plot of the novel

However, before we proceed any further let us go through the plot of the novel. Now I will not try to summarise the story here and you will still have to go to the novel to understand the nuances of the various scenes and events that we will be discussing in today's lecture. But what I want to put forward is a few salient plot points which will help us map the novel. These plot points are arranged chronologically in the sense that I have listed them in the sequence that they come in the novel, but I have also simultaneously tried to use a thematic arrangement – and we have therefore three main thematic groups. The first one as the title of this slide tells you is about introducing the character Okonkwo. Okonkwo is the protagonist of Achebe's novel and is a celebrated member of the Umuofia clan, and the whole plot is actually an unfolding of the life and career of this central character. So I have listed a few points under this thematic heading of Introducing Okonkwo and we will come to each of these points later. The next thematic division aims to discuss the various transgressions that Okonkwo commits, and this in fact forms the meat of the novel. I have listed three points under it and as you can see each of these points list a murder or an attempted murder committed by the protagonist Okonkwo. Again, as with the previous slide, we will come back to each of these points later. By the way, if you have noticed, the words written in bold letters are all names of the characters in the novel. Now moving on to the third slide, here I talk about the effects of the European colonial incursion within the African society and Okonkwo's engagement with these effects.

And it is from this last slide that I want to start my discussion and then gradually backtrack to the earlier slides.

Okonkwo's killing of the court messenger

Now the first point talks about Nwoye, one of Okonkwo's sons, joining the Christian missionaries. The implication of this action will become clearer as we go along. But for now we just note that near about mid-way in the novel we are told about the arrival of a European Christian missionary in Umuofia village. Now here I would like to clarify that though I have been referring to the village society of Umuofia and though even in the novel you are going to come across the phrase "the village of Umuofia", Umuofia is actually the name of a clan to which Okonkwo belongs and this clan inhabits not one but nine villages which nevertheless are geographically as well as culturally closely knit together. Okonkwo's own home village within this Umuofia territory is called Iguedo and when you read the novel you will see that later he gets exiled from his home village and goes to stay in the home village of his mother called Mbanta but all of this of course happens within what might be called the Umuofia land.

Now coming back to the missionary who comes to set up a church in Umuofia, his name is Mr Brown. And though Mr Brown wants to convert the Africans to Christianity, he avoids antagonising the inhabitants of Umuofia and going into any direct confrontation with them. However, Mr Brown soon dies and is replaced by another missionary named Reverend James Smith. Unlike Mr Brown, Reverend Smith has a stricter outlook and does not believe in putting up with the rituals and observances of the people of Umuofia which he considers un-Christian and therefore barbaric. In this new vitiated atmosphere of conflict and confrontation that Reverend Smith creates, a new Christian convert by the name of Enoch goes and humiliates the representation of an ancestral spirit of Umuofia during an annual festival. In an act of revenge, the people of Umuofia burns down the house of Enoch as well as Reverend Smith's

church and this brings out the conflict between the newly arrived Christians and the villagers of Umuofia in the open.

The European district commissioner takes a very strong view of this arson case and as the second point in this slide suggests, 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 the colonial authority into the traditional village life, and kills the leader of the court messengers who had come to the people of Umuofia as representatives of the European district administration. But Okonkwo fails to enthruse the other villagers to wage war against the white man and his authority, and he finally commits suicide.

Now this story as I have narrated so far might appear to be the tale of a great African warrior engaged in a solitary struggle against colonial oppression to protect the dignity of his own people. But this would be a simplistic reading of the narrative. And if we trace back the life and career of Okonkwo and his previous engagements with his own community 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.

Introducing Okonkwo

To understand this complex picture let's start at the very beginning and understand the character of the protagonist better. Okonkwo is introduced early in the novel as the son of a person called Unoka who was a talented musician but was also a coward and spendthrift. Okonkwo from his very childhood was ashamed of his father and his entire character was shaped by a desire to be physically strong and courageous – which were precisely the virtues that were most highly valued by the Umuofian society. Okonkwo proves his prowess by defeating a famously defeating a wrestler called the Cat and from then on he rose to become

one of the tallest leaders of the Umuofia clan who retained a large family with many wives and a number of children.

Okonkwo's Transgressions

What is ironic however is that the very physical prowess which earns him so much respect within the village society also frequently brings him to conflict with its rules and regulations. It is here important to keep in mind that Okonkwo does not deliberately flout any of the traditional regulations but rather his very attempt to exercise his physical strength and aggressive masculinity as a family man and a village leader makes him transgress the limits established by the Umuofian law. For instance, the first serious transgression that Okonkwo commits is to mercilessly beat up his youngest wife during the period of peace in which the people of Umuofia are ritually prohibited from committing any violence. The reason for which Okonkwo beats his wife is because he thinks his wife has neglected her wifely duties, and indeed within the Umuofian society where masculine dominance and physical aggression is highly prized Okonkwo is almost expected to beat his wife for such negligence. But this expectation that as the man of the house Okonkwo is supposed to dominate over the womenfolk of the house comes in conflict with the ritual prohibition not to commit violence in the sacred week of peace. It is this contradiction that traps Okonkwo.

This contradiction again undoes Okonkwo when he kills his adopted son Ikemefuna to prove his courage. 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 but indeed he does the deed himself thereby again committing a transgression because the Oracle had asked Okonkwo to keep away from the whole business. The reason that Okonkwo murders Ikemefuna is his constant fear that others might perceive him as weak like his father Unoka.

His final transgression comes in the form of an accidental killing where his loaded gun shots down the sixteen-year son of a clansman whose funeral Okonkwo was attending. The loaded gun that accidentally fires and kills the boy acts as a perfect metaphor of Okonkwo's character who also acts throughout the novel as a loose cannon which is powerful and yet for that very reason also destructive.

Thus when near the end of the novel Okonkwo emerges as the person who singlehandedly attempts to wage war against the coloniser, the scene is filled with irony. 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. It is the same figure of Okonkwo who both tears apart his community and 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, is not the simplistic story of strong European aggressors conquering and subjugating the weak Africans. The external force of the European colonisers represented here through the figure of the District Commissioner definitely plays its role in the downfall of the African community of Umuofia but it is not the sole agent. As W B Yeats suggests in his poem "The Second Coming" from where Achebe borrows his novel's title, things fall apart because the centre cannot hold them together – 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 the members of his own family. And this includes not only Okonkwo's youngest wife and his adopted son Ikemefuna, but also his son Nwoye whom he constantly ill-treats for being effeminate, and who ultimately joins the Christian missionaries just to escape his father's abuses.

The Pacification of Primitive Tribes

At the end of the novel Okonkwo commits suicide by hanging himself but 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. The Commissioner of course doesn't manage to get hold of Okonkwo but he nevertheless plans to devote a chapter to him and the incidents surrounding his suicide in a book that he had already started writing. The novel ends with the title of this book which reads *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*.

Here Achebe masterfully brings together two aspects of European colonialism—the aspect of military power represented by the armed guards who accompany the Commissioner and the aspect of the colonial discourse represented by the Commissioner's unfinished book which translates the coercive intrusion of the white man within the African society in terms of a civilizing mission. This particular use of the colonial discourse is evident even in the title of Commissioner's book which terms the colonial oppression in Africa as “Pacification” and which diminishes the highly complex social structure of the Igbo community to which we have been introduced in the novel into the activities of a “Primitive Race” – a race which is savage and barbaric and not fully human. As I have mentioned in my earlier lecture, it is precisely to counter this characterisation of Africa and Africans that Achebe took to write his novel *Things Fall Apart*.

So with this we come to an end of our discussion of Chinua Achebe and his novel and in the next lecture we will start looking at colonialism and postcolonialism from within the Indian context. Thank you.