

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 07

Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur

Welcome back to another lecture on postcolonial studies. If you remember, in our previous meeting we had tried to acquaint ourselves briefly with the colonial and precolonial African context, and I had suggested that this acquaintance will help us get a new perspective from which we will be able to produce a contrapuntal reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The most important thing that we need to remember from our previous discussion of the African context is that unlike what the contemporary colonial discourse on Africa suggested, Africans were not a race of barbarians waiting to be redeemed by the civilized Europeans who colonised Africa. Not only did the Africans have long and rich cultural traditions, they were also thriving economically, socially and politically till the 1880s when European powers divided the entire continent of Africa between themselves and reversed much of the gains that the African societies had achieved since the abolition of the slave trade.

If we read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* we will see that though in the text the narrator Marlow relates his story from a position that is apparently sympathetic to the colonised Africans, he never takes into account the fact that Africans too like the Europeans who conquered them are civilized and mature human beings. What Marlow does is merely sympathise with what he thought to be the plight of poor native savages but he never questioned this problematic European coloniser's assumption that Africans were uncivilized brutes. In other words, though the Marlow criticises the oppressive practices that characterised European colonialism in Africa, or in Congo more specifically, he is never really able to look at the Africans that he encounters during his journey towards Kurtz as fellow human beings who are deserving of the same dignity that any white skinned man would normally command.

This line of argument is most forcefully put forward in the celebrated essay titled “Image of Africa” written by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. In today’s lecture we will discuss Achebe’s criticism of Conrad’s novel in his essay “Image of Africa” before moving on to discuss his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*. And I think transition will be a smooth one because Achebe’s criticism of Conrad and his contrapuntal reading of *Heart of Darkness* will provide us with some very important clues regarding how to read his own novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Image of Africa

Achebe’s fundamental argument in his essay is that the way the image of Africa was constructed by the colonising Europeans was guided by an important psychological factor. By portraying Africa and Africans as savage, uncivilized and barbaric, the colonising Europeans wanted to create a foil for themselves so that by contrast they could themselves appear in a positive light as the upholders and carriers of civilization and progress. So an image of Africa was constructed through the colonial discourse which was entirely negative and this, according to Achebe, helped create an all positive image of Europe and Europeans. And when we discussed Said we saw that this negative/positive binary was also equally part of the Orientalist discourse.

What Achebe alleges in his essay is that Conrad too, like most European writers writing about the parts of the world that was colonised by them, thought from within this negative/positive binary. In other words, Conrad’s criticism of the colonial discourse was at best partial. In fact, Achebe argues that in spite of his criticism Conrad shared the most fundamental idea which informed the colonial discourse on Africa --- the idea that Africans were lesser human beings than Europeans. Achebe brings out this bias working within the novel *Heart of Darkness* by drawing our attention to a particular section in the novel in which Marlow, during his journey

down the Congo river looks out from his boat and sees African village life unfolding in the banks of the river. And this is how Marlow chooses to describe what he sees:

suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? [...] we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse.

Please note Marlow's categorisation of the Africans that he saw as prehistoric men. What this means is that Marlow as a European considers himself to be a representative of the modern civilized man and it is from that apparently superior vantage point that Marlow classifies the Africans he sees as prehistoric who are yet to evolve into modern human beings. In fact, the description here doesn't even depict Africans as complete human beings, but as physical fragments –black limbs, clapping hands, stamping feet, rolling eyes and so on and we never get to see an African man or a woman in his or her completeness.

This brings us back to the positive/negative, mature/immature, civilized/barbaric binaries which form the mainstay of the colonial discourse. And this binary mode of thinking that the novel inherits from the colonial discourse is also apparent in the way Marlow portrays normal everyday African village life as the incomprehensible frenzy of a madhouse. It is a mad frenzy which provides a contrast for the sanity that Marlow as a European man supposedly represents.

Was Conrad racist?

One controversial aspect of Achebe's essay is that he ascribes the colonial bias not merely to Marlow and his narration of Africa, but to Conrad himself. In fact, Achebe argues that it is

Conrad's inherent racism that doesn't allow him to see and portray Africans as his fellow human beings even when he is arguing against the brutalities of colonialism. The problem with this argument is that it conflates Marlow and Conrad together and tries to ascribe the ideological peculiarities of the fictional character Marlow on to the author Conrad. The counter argument to this can be that you don't have to be a racist yourself to create a character who shares a racist world view. Indeed, Conrad is very careful never to directly introduce his authorial voice ever in the text. It is only Marlow that we hear, apart from another frame narrator who introduces Marlow on board of the ship Nellie, and as I just said, it might be rather simplistic to just equate Marlow with Conrad. However, Achebe does try to make a very convincing case in his essay and I would encourage you to read the essay and decide for yourself this question about Conrad's racism.

Picasso

There is one more interesting argument that Achebe introduces in his essay "Image of Africa", and I will end this discussion on the essay by referring to it. While revealing the deformed image of Africa and Africans that Conrad presents in his *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe places against it another radically opposed image –the image of a civilized Africa. Thus Achebe talks about how during the first decade of the twentieth century, barely a few years after *Heart of Darkness* was published, the European art world was revolutionised by the advent of what is known as the cubist movement, and cubism in turn was deeply inspired by African art especially the art of the Fang people. The masks made by the Fang people provided a new artistic idiom to such celebrated Western artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, and ironically these Fang people who inspired the most avant garde art movement of the modern Europe were residents of the very Congo region whose people are described in the novel *Heart of Darkness* as brutish inhabitants of a madhouse.

Achebe points out that it is this other image of Africa which is not just civilized but civilized enough to deeply influence the culture of the Western world that is missing in the *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, as Achebe argues, this image of a civilized Africa is found missing in all the discourse about Africa that has originated in the West. And Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* was one of the first attempts to break this stereotypical image of a sinister and barbaric Africa at least within the English speaking world. It is to this novel that I will now turn.

Chinua Achebe

But, before we start exploring *Things Fall Apart* let me properly introduce to you its author Chinua Achebe. Achebe's dates are from 1930 to 2013. He was born in Nigeria in the Igbo tribe and his father was a teacher at a Christian Missionary School. Achebe was himself a product of this very same school and this is an important fact to remember because the particular kind of education that he received in a missionary school introduced him to various classics of British literature early on in his life. The novels that he later wrote, though they tell of the lives of the African people, are always shot through with references to British literature. This is evident even in the title *Things Fall Apart* which refers to a famous poem by William Butler Yeats called "The Second Coming". We will have to come back to this reference later on. Achebe's first novel in English was *Things Fall Apart*. As I have already told you this was first published in 1958 and the publisher was a London based firm called Heinemann which later went on to publish a very influential book series of post-independence African writers with Achebe as its first advisory editor. Besides *Things Fall Apart* other notable works of fiction published by Achebe include *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Things Fall Apart

Let us now turn to the novel *Things Fall Apart* and see how it approaches the project of writing the colonial history of Africa from an African perspective and presenting in image of a civilized Africa. A good way to understand this project would be to go back to the scene in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow describes from his boat the frenzied activities of the Africans in the bank, and thinks of it as a madhouse that is incomprehensible to a sane man. Now because Marlow is narrating this scene, we immediately situate ourselves on the boat along his side and observe the scene from his European perspective but what if we switch our position? What if we look at it from an African perspective—that is from the bank of the river itself where the frenzied activities are going on? Will it give us a different a different insight into the colonial encounter?

Well Achebe's novel helps us in effecting this switching of positions because it takes us directly inside an African village, though this one is located in Nigeria and not in Congo. The first thing that we feel when looking from inside the African village is that even the most frenzied activities of the villagers neither look like savagery nor does it look like madness. The reason for this is that unlike Marlow who looks at a similar scene of the African village as an outsider, we are presented in Achebe's novel with a wholly coherent African world view and we see the village activities as an insider. Thus for the first three chapters, Achebe painstakingly details the various rituals and actions that hold a precolonial Igbo village society together. We come to know the hierarchical structure of the Igbo village, we come to know the importance that this society attaches to physical prowess among men and how that prowess is tested through regular wrestling matches between the people of the community, we also come to know of the importance of the yam crop whose harvesting cycle plays an essential role in organising the annual life of the villagers. Thus when chapter six opens with a scene where three drummers are seen working feverishly on their drums, and a huge gathering of people roaring and clapping,

it no longer appear to us as the mass of clapping hands and stamping feet of savages that Marlow claims to have witnessed from his boat. Because Achebe's novel places this frenzy of the drummers and of the crowd in a context. By the time we reach this scene, we know that these are all part of the festivities that are associated with the harvesting of yams, and the crowds are roaring and clapping to cheer the wrestlers who are to participate in the annual wrestling festival of the village of Umuofia. It is this insider's view, which Achebe's novel provides, that helps us in breaking free from the biases and prejudices of the colonial discourse and align with an African perspective.

In the following lecture we will explore *Things Fall Apart* in further details. We will talk about the characters and plot structure of the novel and we will also see how the colonial encounter looks when it is viewed from the African perspective that is presented in this novel. Thank you.