

**Postcolonial Literature**  
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**Lecture No. #07**  
**Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (I)**

Hello and welcome back, to this course on, Postcolonial Literature. Now, 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 in that Lecture, 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.

Now, 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 kept repeating, Africa and Africans were not a race of barbarians, who were waiting to be redeemed by the civilised Europeans, who Colonised their land. Right, that was far from the case. In fact, not only did the Africans have a long and rich cultural tradition, cultural traditions in fact, various cultural traditions are to be found in Africa, today.

Not only, did they have these cultural traditions, they were also thriving economically, socially, politically, they were experimenting with constitutional forms of political governance. And, this was going on till the 1880's, when the European moved in, and claimed the entire continent for themselves, as their Colonies. And, by doing so, reversed much of the gains, that the African societies had achieved, in almost every field, since the abolition of the slave trade, in the early 19th century.

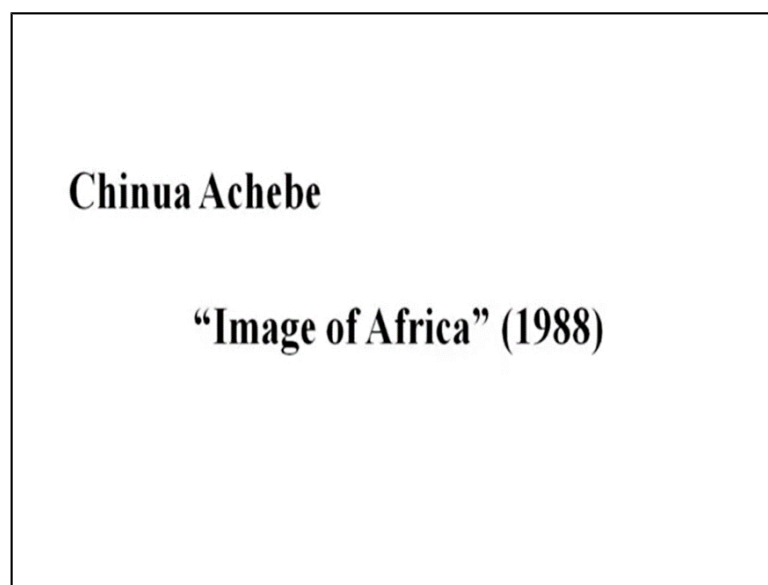
Now, if you read Conrad's Heart of Darkness, we will see that, though in the text, the narrator Marlow, relates a story, from a position that is apparently sympathetic to the Colonised Africans, he never takes into account, the fact that Africans too, like the Europeans, who conquered them, are civilised and mature human beings. What Marlow does is therefore merely sympathise, with what he thought to be the plight of poor native savages.

But, he never seen to question, the problematic European Colonisers assumption, that Africans were uncivilised roots. In other words, do Marlow criticises the oppressive

practices, that characterised European Colonialism in Africa, or in Congo more specifically, he is never really able to, sort of look at the Africans, that he encounters in his journey across Congo, to meet Kurtz. He never seems to realise, that they are, the African that encounters, they are his fellow human beings.

And therefore, they deserve the same dignity, that any white man, any white skinned man, would normally command. And, this line of argument, that I have just stated, is perhaps most forcefully put forward, in the celebrated essay titled, Image of Africa, written by the Nigerian Novelist, Chinua Achebe

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And, in Today's Lecture, we will discuss Achebe's criticism of Conrad's Novel, in his essay, Image of Africa, before we move on to discuss his seminal Novel titled, Things Fall Apart. And, I think that this transition, from the essay to the Novel, would be a smooth one. Because, Achebe's criticism, of how Conrad portrays Africa and Africans in his Heart of Darkness, will provide us with some very important clues, about how to read Achebe's own Novel, Things Fall Apart, and its depiction of African society and African people.

Now, coming to the essay Image of Africa, the fundamental argument, that Achebe makes in that essay, is at the way the Image of Africa was constructed by the Colonising Europeans, was guided by an important psychological need in them. Achebe argues, that by portraying Africa and Africans, as Savage, Uncivilised, Brutish, Barbaric, what the Colonised, who are the Colonising Europeans were actually doing was, they were creating a foil for themselves.

So, that by contrast, they could themselves appear in a positive light. And, if the Africans were Savages and Barbarians, then by contrast, the Europeans started looking like, very convincingly, the upholders, and key areas of the light of civilisation. So, an Image of Africa was constructed through the Colonial Discourse, that was entirely negative. And, this according to Achebe, help create an own positive image of Europe and Europeans.

And, if you remember, when we discussed Edward Said, we saw that this same negative-positive binary, was also equally part of the Orientalist Discourse. Now, what Achebe alleges in his essay, Image of Africa, is at Conrad too, like most European Writer's, 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, a partial criticism.

Why? Because, Achebe argues that, in spite of his criticism, Conrad shared the most fundamental idea, which informed the Colonial Discourse on Africa. And, what was that fundamental idea? The idea was, of course, that Africans were lesser human beings than Europeans. So, in spite of Conrad's criticism, Achebe argues, Conrad still could not jettison this notion, that Africans are lesser human beings.

And, 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

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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  
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Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness*

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.

Now, please note here that, Marlow categorises the Africans, and that he sees from his boat, as prehistoric men. And, what this means is that, Marlow as a European, considers himself to be the representative of the modern civilised man. And, it is from that upper end vantage point of superiority, that Marlow classifies the Africans, that he sees as prehistoric, who are yet to evolve into modern human beings.

In fact, the description here, does not even depict Africans, as complete human beings. Rather, they are depicted as physical fragments, as black limbs, stamping feet, rolling eyes, and so on. And, we never get to see an African man or a woman, in his or her completeness, as if an entire and complete human identity is impossible, in an African. And, this brings us back to the Positive-Negative, Mature-Immature, Civilised-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. And, he does that, as we have seen in this quotation. He does that, as something, which is characterised by 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.

Now, one controversial aspect of Achebe's criticism of Heart of Darkness, in his essay Image of Africa is that, he describes 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 does not allow him to see and portray Africans, as his fellow human beings, even while, he is arguing against the Brutalities of Colonialism. Now, this argument has a problem.

And, the problem with this argument is that, it is conflicting Marlow and Conrad together. So, what it is doing is that, it is trying to ascribe the aetiological peculiarities of a fictional character, that is Marlow, on to the author Conrad himself. And here, a counter argument is possible. And, that counter argument is that, you, yourself do not need to be a racist, in order to portray, in order to create a character, who shares a racist aetiology.

In other words, Conrad himself need not have been a racist, in order to create a character like Marlow, who has a racist, revolves you ((13:19)). And, you remember that, it is only Marlow, that we hear, apart from another frame narrator, who introduces Marlow, on board of the ship, Nelly. And, it is only Marlow's voice, apart from that narrator, first narrator, whom we meet very briefly, in the Novel.

It is only Marlow's voice, that we hear, and it is Marlow's voice, that describes Africa. And, Conrad is very careful, not to introduce his authorial voice, into this narrative. But, having said this, I would also say that, Achebe does try to make a very convincing case, regarding Conrad's racism, in his essay. And, I will leave it up to you, to read the essay, and decide on this issue. So, I leave it, as an open-ended question.

Now, moving on with the essay, there is one more very interesting argument, that Achebe makes in his essay, Image of Africa. And, I will end this discussion on the essay, by referring to it. So, while revealing the deformed Image of Africa and Africans, that is presented in Heart of Darkness, Achebe places against it, are radically opposed image, the image of a civilised Africa. So, on the one hand, he brings out, how Africa is presented in Conrad's Novel, as an uncivilised space, as a space inhabited by Savages and Barbarians.

And, he then goes on to place, create another Image of Africa, which is that of a civilised Africa. And, how does he do this. Well, he does this, Achebe does this, by talking about, how during the first decade of the 20th century, which means, barely a few years after the publication of Heart of Darkness, the European art world was revolutionised by the advent of, what is known as the Cubist movement. And, Cubism, as Achebe shows, in turn, was deeply inspired by African art, especially the art of the Fang people

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And, the masks, and here in the slide, you can see, an example of the mask created by Fang people. The masks made by these Africans, provided a new artistic idiom, to such celebrated western artists like Pablo Picasso for instance, or Henri Matisse. And ironically, these Fang people, who inspired the most avant-garde art movement of 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.

And, Achebe stresses on this irony. He also points out that, therefore, there is, this other Image of Africa, that is possible. An Image of Africa, that is civilised. And, not only civilised, but civilised enough, to deeply influence the culture of the modern western world. And, Achebe's basic argument therefore is that, this image offer civilised Africa, is completely missing in Conrad's Novel, Heart of Darkness.

Indeed, as Achebe argues, this image of a civilised Africa is found missing, in not only merely in this one Novel, it is found missing in all the Discourses 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. And, it is to this Novel that, I will now turn. But, before we start exploring Things Fall Apart, let me properly introduce to you its author, Chinua Achebe

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## Chinua Achebe

(1930–2013)



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We have been talking about, Achebe. And here, is his image. Achebe's dates are from, 1930 to 2013. And, he was born in Nigeria, in a tribe called, 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. Why? Because, the particular kind of education, to which Achebe was exposed to, as a child in a missionary school, gave him access, to the classics of British Literature.

And, later on, when he would write his Novels, about the African people, and though he was writing about Africa and Africans, his Novels would be shot through, would be pervaded, with references to British texts and western classics, in general. And, this is evident even, in *Things Fall Apart*, if you just noticed the title, *Things Fall Apart*. The title refers to a poem, a very famous poem, titled *The Second Coming*, written by William Butler Yeats.

And, *Things Fall Apart*, is a reference to a particular line, in the poem. And, we will have to return back to this reference, later on. But, now, I would just like to point out that, *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958. A very influential Novel. And, it was published by a London-based firm called [Heinemann](#). And, this is again important because, [Heinemann](#) would later on go on to publish a very influential series, called the African Writer's series, in which they would publish.

And therefore, sort of circulate, within the English-speaking world, a number of post-independence African Writer's. And, Chinua Achebe acted as a first advisory editor of this

African Writer's series. And, incidentally, *Things Fall Apart*, was also the first book to be published, in that African Writer's series.

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- *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
- *No Longer at Ease* (1960)
- *Arrow of God* (1964)
- *A Man of the People* (1966)
- *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

So, apart from his first Novel, Achebe is also known for these, other works of fiction. So, *Things Fall Apart*, was published in 1958. Then, there was *No Longer at Ease*, which was published in 1960. *Arrow of God*, 1964. *A Man of the People*, published in 1966. And, *Anthills of the Savannah*, which was published in 1987. Now, let us 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.

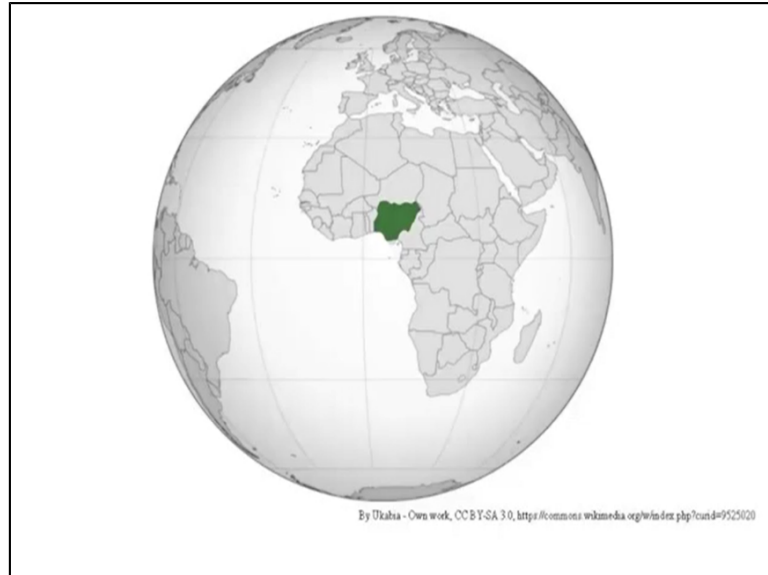
And, how it presents an image of a civilised Africa, in contrast with the image of an uncivilised Africa, that we have already encountered in the British Novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Now, a good way to understand this project, would be to go back to the scene, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow describes from his boat, the frenzied activities of the Africans in the bank. And, he of course thinks of it as a Madhouse, that is incomprehensible to a sane man like him, a same European like him.

Now, because Marlow is narrating the scene, we immediately situate ourselves on the boat along his side, and we start looking at the scene, from his perspective, which is European. But, what if we switch our position. What if, we look at it from an African perspective, that is to say, from the bank of the river itself, where the frenzied activities are going on. Will it give us a different insight, into the Colonial encounter, altogether.



Now, Achebe's Novel helps us do just that, helps us switch our position, vis-à-vis, Heart of Darkness, because it takes us directly, inside an African village. Though, this village in Achebe's Novel titled, or rather known as Umuofia, is located in Nigeria, and not in Congo.

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And, here you can see, the shaded area represents the modern-day country of Nigeria. Now, the first thing that we feel, when we look from inside the African village, is that even the most frenzied activities of the villagers, neither looked like savagery, nor does it look like incoherent madness. And, 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 wholly coherent African values.

And, we see, therefore the village activities, as an insider. Thus, for the first five chapters or so for instance, of Achebe's Novel, Things Fall Apart, he painstakingly details the various rituals and actions, that hold a Precolonial Igbo village society together. We come to know from these chapters, the hierarchical structure of the Igbo village. Umuofia is an Igbo village. We come to know, of its hierarchical structure.

We come to know the importance, that this society attaches to physical prowess of men, and how that progress 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 villages. Thus, after these five chapters, 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 appears 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. And, by the time, we reach this scene, we know that, these are all part of the festivities, that are associated with the harvesting of the Yam. And, the crowds are roaring and clapping, not as mad people, but rather, they are cheering the wrestlers, who are about to participate in the annual wrestling match, which again is associated with the Yam harvest.

Now, it is this Insider's view, which Achebe's Novel provides, that helps us really to break free, from the buyers and the prejudice of the Colonial Discourse about Africa, and align ourselves with the African perspective. In the following Lecture, we will explore, *Things Fall Apart*, in further details, will look into this African perspective, that the Novel helps us align with. We will also talk about, characters and plot structures of the Novel, and see, how the Colonial encounter looks, when it is viewed from the African perspective, that is presented in the Novel. Thank you.