



half yearly

# Discourse(s)

a journal for  
multidisciplinary studies

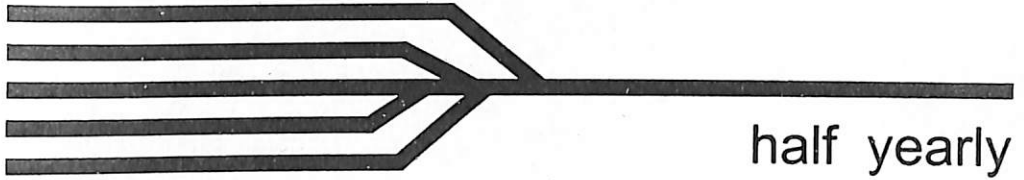


---

Volume 6

Number 1

August 2004



half yearly

# **Discourse(s)**

a journal for  
multidisciplinary studies



---

Volume 6

Number 1

August 2004

*Published from :*

Union Christian College Alwaye - 683 101, India

## **Ethnicity as a Tool of Investigation**

**Tessy Anthony C and Dr. P. M. Chacko \***

**E**thnicity is very important in evaluating a literary text. Looking at things from an ethnic angle may appear as narrowness of attitude but this is what is happening all around us, with some of us being unaware of it. While reading a text we identify with the writer at the national, cultural, racial, and gender level. This is often done consciously and unconsciously. At the conscious level we make segregations at gender, racial, religious, psychological, and cultural levels. The biological traits that identify us racially are often a hindrance in social milieus. Yet in understanding the cultural arrows of meaning within a text ethnicity proves to be an important tool. Let us now look at some of the major factors of ethnicity.

### **People hood and otherness**

When you become conscious of your ethos you become aware of a sense of belonging to a people. At the same time you are quite aware of being unlike the mainstream or you are aware of your otherness. This is what is meant by people hood and otherness. As per the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* one's ethnicity denotes one's descent, certain typical characteristics, one's sense of belonging or one's sense of belonging to a nonwestern group of cultural traditions. Ethnicity has the double meaning of "people hood" and "otherness". While reading a text there are pointers within it that signify "peoplehood". Africans will certainly find affinity with the Ibo society of 1850s. At the same time Ibo culture and values make it stand apart from the mainstream. A culture is generated in everything you say and do. Sabine I. Golz in "How ethnic I am" says, "Ethnicity is transformed from something one is into something one does". (48) Werner Sollors shares this opinion in *The Invention of Ethnicity* stating that ethnicity is not a thing but a process, and all that you do is your ethnic self. By writing, the ethnic identity will certainly express his inner most self. And the perusal of a text makes you conscious of a people at the same time demarcating them from the mainstream as "otherness". Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* reflects African Ibo culture. In this novel we have strands of Ibo culture that stands apart from the Western

---

\* Department of English, Union Christian College, Aluva

Episteme. Though the novel is written in English, African tribal life is the essence. Writing in English is an attempt at resisting representation as the writer wishes it to be. Achebe makes use of several Ibo words such as "obi", "chi" "Umuofia", "agballa", "kotna" "ekwe", ekwennu" which have no English equivalents. His inventiveness in integrating Ibo words into English so naturally in course of his narration is commendable. The flavour is certainly Ibo ethnicity.

### Hybridity

Yet another factor that contributes to ethnicity is hybridity. Today the purity of a race raises many eyebrows. We have only the hybrid straddled with many cultures or multiple identities. There is more pluralism than assimilation. Initially people face cultural dislocation and try to ape the new progressive culture. But before it is too late they assert their ethnic identity. Okonkwo the protagonist tries very hard to fight the infiltration of Western culture into traditional Ibo life. Some tribals embrace Christianity and get assimilated while some others assert their ethnic identity, like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

Ethnicity is the sum total of several forces — historical, cultural, social and psychological. Ethnicity is inter disciplinary and the sum total of several forces-colour, race, physical characteristics, boundaries, belonging. It involves a certain love-hate relationship. You hate your culture because you are a representation of an ethnic group. You love your culture because it has something that makes it unique. You are an individual and a type. You love it because you are different.

### Post-colonialism

One of the factors that can be conceived to contribute to ethnicity is an individual's post-colonial stance. Ethnicity can make you proud of your ethnic baggage. It can also make you feel marginalized. Where ethnicity comes to the forefront you feel marginalised. You feel alien or alienated. The ethnic identities write back in the language of their colonizers conscious of their "hybridity". They know this duality within them has come to stay. So they create for themselves a niche or a platform from where to speak. And their writing is a testimony of their refusal to concede to the melting-pot theory, and psychological resistances to colonialisms civilizing influence and mission. The assertion of these ethnic identities is similar to Sartre's revolutionary pronouncement in *Being and Nothingness* "I lay claim to this being which I am; that is, I wish to recover it, or,

more exactly, I am the project of the recovery of my being”( 1998:17). Only if the individual is conscious of himself as a being will he not want to be just another being but want to assert his identity and difference. Through their works, and through “mimicry” which is an outcome of acculturation these writers flush out colonial hangover and resist it. In *Post Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* Leela Gandhi opines, “ It is true that we are hybrids. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can write only as our own nationality (155). These writers appropriate the English language on the grounds that it is not really an alien language to us, and in so doing they exemplify the hybridity and syncretism favored by postcolonial literary texts. They replace a western cultural paradigm with its non-Western counterpart. The English language is of the West, yet, the ethnic writes in it. He introduces his own vocabulary, experiences in a new land, experiences of cultural dislocation, and nuances to the language.

### **Cultural pointers**

Within a text there are always cultural pointers which the writer has consciously and unconsciously included. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye unable to live up to his father’s standards takes refuge in Christianity for consolation and sustenance. It is always repressed and undervalued self -identities that surface in texts. When Achebe writes in English it is a challenge to the West. Random exposure to English makes you use English but the psyche reflected is ethnic. Memory, past, our collective unconscious and our environment play a vital role in moulding the sum total of our psyche and personality. There is an unassuaged desire for recognition, which is fulfilled in their works “Language is the place where the personal and the cultural intersect, where there is a constant displacement of meaning” (*The Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism* 1990: 771). When ethnicity is understood the mysteries of the text are also unravelled.

Cultural differences are manifested in texts however much you try to conceal it. It is for peaceful coexistence that we tolerate differences in skins, attitudes, values, cultures, and religion and goals.

In maintaining your ethnicity you maintain your differences. There is no need to melt down the differences but let the differences live together like in a tossed salad. Even when you think you have acculturated there are moments when the collective unconscious pulls you to reveal certain traits of its existence.

### Psychological

The reasons for an individual's behaviour is always directly proportionate to his state of mind. And the post-modern man is only too individualistic, conscious of his moorings and longs for an upward mobility. Psychological factors are still another reason for the reiteration of ethnicity. Writing for a wide audience a writer uses English and reflects his culture and satisfies his repressed feelings of the collective unconscious. Primordial feelings when long repressed will certainly surface. The push forward and the pull of one's racial past cannot be overlooked. Cashing on your culture is another way of stressing ethnicity. Michel Foucault argues that ethnology should be the study of 'the unconscious processes that characterize the system of a given culture'. His *The Order of Things* represents, ethnology as a history of sameness and resemblances. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* remains one of the greatest examples of ethnology of European institutional practices of power. And in *The History of Madness* he highlights the history of the other. It is a history of differences which when kept bottled inside it comes out all the more stronger. People are strained to speak of their identity. Even if a person wants to crush his ethnic identity he can't. In spite of himself he is under heavy pressure since his racial past will unconsciously surface if he does so. In certain cultures there is a value attached to certain customs so you can't give it up since it is so deep rooted. You feel guilty that is what Foucault mentions in the unconscious process. So when you assimilate you can't just give up all of your past and start afresh. What is in the unconscious will certainly surface at some point of time. These customs connected to one's culture are concepts that are terrible and good. So it is at once interior and foreign, a kind of love-hate relationship.

### Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism can elevate mainstream culture hence, it is a great blow to growing ethnicity. Since mainstream culture evaluates other cultures by their own yardsticks minor cultures are marginalised. Hegemonic structures are ensured when society has secured the power through popular consent. Writers can decolonise only by breaking away from these hegemonic structures by asserting their ethnic identity. Ethnic groups clamour for an ethnic resurgence and from there a text is born. The same things are told in a different light, which adds to the texts newness. It is differences ("otherness") that

led to the forming of new enclaves and texts. The hallmark of ethnicity is identity. Human identity is not possible without ethnicity. Writing is ventilation for the ethnic urges of Chinua Achebe. Their works can be self-expression or a way of self gratification. That is a vicarious pleasure of writing on behalf of people.

Ethnicity is a source of events. You find ethnicity in language, in religion, in culture, and in psychology. Ethnicity can be negative when it becomes ethnocentrism. Within a text there is a play of power relations. The mainstream is so sure of its predominance that it has a step motherly attitude to ethnic groups. It is the attitude of cultures towards minor or alien ones that propels writers to bring forth texts rich in cultural traditions. Ethnic literature is a product of emigration and immigration. It is a safety valve of growing population. It is the push-pull factor. The text is a product of resisting hegemonic structures. The attempt of the writer to dethrone Western perspectives of a culture is felt. Afraid of ethnic cleansing he grapples for a meaningful space. The writer himself gives voice to the dormant feelings looking for a breakthrough. He is conscious of his moorings and longs for upward mobility by gaining wide readership. He reflects his culture as he perceives it and not through the western gaze.

### **Cultural pluralism**

Still another factor of ethnicity is cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is what gives space to ethnicity. By adhering to the melting pot theory no culture wishes to be erased. This has given rise to the upsurge of many cultures or cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is of two kinds- subordination and equality. The marginalized always writes with fiery zeal to express the soul shaking experiences and the differences. When you assert from a niche for a space, you cant consciously think of philosophizing. Since you are fighting erasure of your ethos. The ethnic minority works three times more hard to prove his mettle and to speak the nuances of his culture and ethos. Hence a local incident does get a universal colouring. Experience alone can broaden your mental space and allow room for tolerance. A peaceful coexistence is possible only then. Ethnicity are more tolerant and broad in their outlook since they have suffered. Sameness brings about differences. A border lined existence helps in a better perception of things. All of these sub cultures add a little flavor to the modern composite society. Modern societies are one of cultural pluralism or a diverse culture.

Consciously or unconsciously acknowledging a writer for his brilliance is a move by the writer to manoeuvre your interests into once marginalized discourses. Throughout the text you sense binary oppositions between ethnic and mainstream. The minority culture's powerful presence of the writer highlighting his culture which is stifled and suppressed with an ulterior motive. Whether they admit it or not they write for self-ventilation. In a text there is move to retrieve the history of the silenced ethnic self. After a period of neglect they are reasserting themselves.

### Protest Literature

Ethnicity raises it's head when writers of ethnic identity protest through their works. The literature of writers of ethnic identity is marginal so they write protest Literature. Their works are caught between mainstream and ethnic. They protest against the inferior status received. Their text stems from an introspection and a sense of homecoming. As Greeley puts it:

The person with the most healthy and comprehensive universalistic outlook is not the one who has cut himself off from or denies the tradition and heritages, the symbols and the experiences which have shaped him but rather the one who has been able to explore and understand the depths of his own traditions and finds in it that which has universal implications as well as the attractive colorings of his own time and place... Any particularism which does not strive for the universal is parochial, and any universalism which ignores its particular roots is naïve— and probably dull... Unity around universal norms is achieved ... not by an alienating homogenization... but by pluralistic integration (519).

A text reflects a culture. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe reflects nineteenth century Ibo society. Achebe is a writer who has decolonised and is only recreating a past for a culture not to be extinct. He uses English to describe Ibo environment and makes use of Ibo values and Ibo imagery. And readers are empowered since the author has encapsulated a culture at the same time ensnared the folktales and ethos of that culture. Within the storyline you learn of the alienated self, caught between cultures. The attempt at ethnocentrism is felt when the writer loudly protests against mainstream through meaningful signs. The text can be read at a psychological, cultural, social, and linguistic level of the marginalized. A text is born out of introspection, fertile experiences, and fiery imaginations. A literary text is a redefinition of racial experiences through the eyes of the ethnic writer. Sandra L' Gilman writes, "Ethnicity is certainly a lens through



which literature, even Shakespeare's, can be read. As James Shapiro has recently shown, Shakespeare uses Jews to represent what is not English"(25). These ethnic writers too make use of ethnic characters to distinguish between mainstream culture and their own heritage. A text is culture generating and an assertion of identity. Hence any text can be studied when the tool is ethnicity.

### References

1. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books 1963, rep 2001.
2. *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford: University Press, 1994 Ed. Gordon Marshal.
3. Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
4. Nathan Glazer Daniel Moynihan. *Ethnicity Theory and Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1975.
5. *The Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism 1990* Ed. Martin Coyle, Peter Garside Malcolm Kelsall John Peck Routledge London.
6. Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Science* trans.
7. Anonymous London Tavistock [1966].
8. Foucault Michel *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans A.M. Sheridan Smith New York: Pantheon Books 1982.
9. Greeley Andrew M "Who's a Chauvinist?" (Review of Ethnic chauvinism by Orlando Patterson). *Contemporary Sociology*, 8, 4, July 1979.
10. Werner, Sollors. *The Invention of Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press 1989.
11. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd. rep. 1997.
12. Gilman, Sandra L. "Ethnicity" *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* New York. NY (PMLA) 1998 113:1.
13. Golz, Sabine I. "How ethnic Am I" *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* New York. NY (PMLA) 1998 Jan, 113:1, 46-51.