END OF THE "GRAND TEXT"

Towards a 'Commonwealth of Texts

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Distinguished makers of American destiny, past and present, members of a great community that has withstood the ravages of history, members of faculty and students who live and work in this Commonwealth of shared values, Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to convey to you the greetings of the faculty and students of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur and the love of the people of India for your great nation and for the great institutions you have built.

Standing here, I am overwhelmed by history. The valiant Virginians were among the leaders of the American Revolution. Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence while George Washington assumed command of the Armies. It was at Yorktown that the British Armies were forced to surrender on October 18, 1781 leading to the treaty of Paris of 1783, which recognized the Independence of the American Colony. Virginia continued its national in the following decades furnishing four of America's first five Presidents, among them Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Much of the intellectual ferment out of which the basic political institutions of the young American nation were shaped, happened here. Yet it is Virginia, which became the Chief battleground of the Civil War, it ceded from the Union in 1861 and was readmitted in 1870. Virginia of course escaped much   of the punishments that Reconstruction inflicted on other States, but its loss of thousands of young men remained irreparable. But then history heals its wounds by piling upon them layers and layers of texts, and when it still hurts; it either rewrites the texts or writes new ones on the old. In any case, the marks of the wounds remain. Two thousand years after Christ, we can still see them. Ours is a wounded civilization. When I speak as an Indian to a Virginian American, I am overwhelmed by this shared past of our civilization. We both have our colonial pasts. You have coped with your past by rewriting your text. We are in the process of writing new ones over the old. The term postcolonial, without a hyphen, that came to be used in the intellectual discourses

is in fact a name given to the process of textualisation of civilization. It is an intellectual strategy to relate our present to the past with the hope that the open-ended quest of human progress would draw from its past, without being its repository of loss. The substance of the matter is 'Text'. But then Postmodern are arrayed against the postcolonial on this score. Let us begin by examining the battlefield: between Colonial and Postcolonial and between Postcolonial and Postmodern.

Post-colonial literature, to me, means textualised writing which consciously tries to resist and transform the colonial structures embedded within the very unconscious of the people of the nations the colonial past. These structures had grown out of colonial texts disseminated amongst the natives in order to make them realize and relate to an identity fashioned in the colonizing nations. The colonial texts worked by a strategy of marginalization. This strategy aimed at positioning the natives far from the narrative space of the text dominated by the colonizer. The position of the native in the text was indicative of his inferior ontology. These texts, therefore, did not register the oppositional voices of the natives. However, they did occasionally make the native speak from the background or the footnotes to reassert and legitimize the superiority of the colonizer. The native indigenous writers, the makers of insurgent literature during the freedom struggle, grappled with these structures in their texts based on the valorization of pre-colonial history, myth and literature. Their texts, which were mainly rewritings of colonial texts, reversed the binaries and turned upside down the dangerous little hierarchies that established their inferiority. The process of reversal, complex as it was, gave shape to new biases subsumed within anti-authoritarian movements around the world. These texts built on the counter- strategy of a desire to establish the superiority of the native and the entire pre-colonial civilization chose to live in the past, foreclosing the possibility of its ever emerging into the present or the future. Present would be synonymous with compliance and future would be nowhere. In this sense, they were anti-teleological, non progressive and non-linear, attributes that went against the very essence of Enlightenment that had propelled the colonial desiring machines into action. However, their non-compliance with history and negotiation with forces moving backwards in time to explore the imaginary origin, made them look static to readers inclined to re-invent themselves in present. The stage was set for the arrival of the postcolonial text. The postcolonial texts were different. They did not wish to be seen as counterpoints. For them resistance did not mean building a strong line of defense. Rather it was a mediating act, which originated out of a realization that colonial structures were indispensable,

for they encapsulated in them the whole civilization of Europe. This realization made the postcolonial writer assimilate and transform these structures. The underlying motive was to construct textual discourses for nations to find their voices and for securing places in the history of the civilization. The process of assimilation and transformation, however, led these writers into realizing the significance of the sites of cultural-in-betweeness, sites that produced a plethora of creative outbursts and a new kind of aesthetics where the possibilities of creation through negotiation with a wide range of significations across cultural boundaries existed. The realization of multiple possibilities triggered off by creative alliances within the interesting borderlines of a global order, made the postcolonial writers feel the need to redefine the limits of their production sites. The need was fulfilled through ceaseless negotiations with and assimilations of, multiple choices. Postcolonial texts, in this sense, had become truly cosmopolitan. They had broadened their narrative space to take in everything that the world offered through national borders. They were not seen merely as transforming agents. They were seen as initiators of many new formations. As a result of over stretching the textual borders gave in and postcolonial texts lost their status. They merged awkwardly with the postmodern, a concept that had its origin in the despair and the nullity of the postwar years of Europe and America, which culminated eventually into an era of unmatched prosperity. As the fruits of stupendous scientific and technological advancement of this era fell around the world, they initiated a process that we know as globalization. Postmodernism, in fact mirrored the process of globalization that led to the re-production of cultural and social space, which undermined stratifications, enabled homogeneity of tastes and styles, challenged the underlying solidity of our lives and triggered off a process of commodification that ironically fixed a price tag on the process itself. That created 'non-places'. The best examples of such wide –ranging changes can be found in the nearest Departmental Stores, the non-places that enabled a kind of reconciliation between the conflicting elements of time and value. The reconciliation was achieved through a strategy of de-essentialization , a strategy that aimed to objectify our whole existence. In other words, the meanings and values that determined our status as pure beings were seen as objects available for commerce. As a result, history and culture were placed among objects meant to be consumed and relegated to background. Postmodernism theorized this trend and registered its effects in varied aspects of our life. Even writing as a concept underwent drastic changes. It was re-conceptualized   as free and radically dissipative, poised to break new grounds. Postmodern

writing was to interrogate and abandon the stable anchoring points of civilization that had given it a differential status and vital linkages with nation's past and history. However, for postcolonial texts, texts that emerged from nations with colonial past, the postmodern trend was tempting yet admittedly self-destructive. Any alliance with global trends of postmodernism meant that texts aim only at providing creative pleasure and satisfaction. Texts, if at all, would then become objects" groundless, bottomless, and severed from everything that gave them stability and strength to hold on to their ground in a global world where change was permanent. The new global status that the postcolonial texts gained for themselves became the very cause of their unbecoming. Possibilities multiplied rapidly as postcolonial texts discovered new frontiers but through a 'writing that posed a threat to its core rooted deep in the past of nations. Postmodern writing engaged with past, perhaps, more frequently than postcolonial writing did. However, these were engagements bordering on irony whose propose was subversion. As the postmodernists do not believe in past, real and concrete, they treat it like commodity available for consumption. In other words, past existed as an available absence, an absence, which could be imagined in multiple ways. It was something that one could toy with, alter and parodize. This was in absolute contrast to writing that rendered past as the most parodize phase to which one returned for providing stability and fixity to his life stretched in all possible directions, Unable to ward off new dangers manifested in postmodern writing, postcolonial texts arrived at a stage of renewal. With the passage of time, writers from nations with a colonial pasts, aimed at resuscitating texts that celebrated writing only to perish untimely. Texts revealing postmodern tendencies were replaced by a new kind of text that subjected writing to mild and useful restraint. The challenge for the writers from developing nations was to invent texts that could represent their nation while remaining open to ideas across borders. This led to the recognition of indigenous texts that were shades different from the postcolonial and the native texts valorized during the early phase of decolonization. These indigenous texts, did not reverse the binaries that had the 'colonized' at the receiving end nor did they, attempt to situate themselves within the condition of post-modernity. Theses texts depicted 'nation' as the central organizing principle and yet remained open to stylistic postmodern innovations. In indigenous texts, experimentations were carried out to analyze the traits that constituted the idea of nationhood. Past and history were not simply put forward as trophies to foreground a nation's uniqueness as in the case of resistance-texts. Postcolonial indigenous texts displayed their firm belief in the idea that there

was something stable and permanent in our lives, something that did not succumb to the global forces nor did they feel any need to transform themselves. That 'something' made the indigenous postcolonials respond to varied situations in ways that the postmoderns could not fathom .There were ceaseless experimentations in the indigenous texts to arrive at that permanent core, that unique indigenous sensibility. As a result texts lives and writing flourished not by erasing the contours of nations or spatial-temporal configurations that aided their production. In contrast, postmodern texts have degenerated into parody of texts; they celebrated writing only to subvert it. Postmodern writing truly was and still is an example of subversive writing that glides over nation, region, history, individuality and location through a bizarre mix or remix of techniques and ideas that flit through non-palpable sites of perpetual interrogation.

Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" may apparently seem to be a piece of subversive writing, forcefully creative yet dangerously unreliable, intensely revelatory yet devilishly inclined toward its own demise, erasing and demolishing every meaningful site in the text. Though one detects, "flickers of meaning" in Conrad's writing, momentarily lighting up reader's passage into the inner station, their significance lies in deluding us into the oppressive darkness. However, this is not what Achebe thought while accusing Conrad of racism. He took those flickers for vivid sparks, illuminating the text, giving him enough reason to doubt and interrogate the 'unspeakable'. Writing after hundred years of the publication of Heart of Darkness, Achebe was fully aware of his role and his position in time. As a writer, he realized his significance in retrieving and conjoining bits and pieces of the African history lying within the half-effaced within the debris of the colonial structures. Achebe's response to Conrad's text was indicative of his resolution to fashion history and his way of coming to terms with the postcolonial moment. His accusation of Conrad as a racist is a product of that moment enabling him to see the unspeakable in Conrad's text. Moreover, it was Achebe's resolve to make a perfect beginning while creating a suitable history for the Africans that made him choose a text built on nullity and void, a text that offered him clear grounds, un-spoilt locations and a sense of having returned to the state of purity Achebe sensed in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' what he wanted to sense: a fixation on blackness, a deliberate portrayal of Africans as in-humans and a wish to keep them permanently frozen in the state of pre-history. In fact, these became the very basis of his writing in, 'Things Fall Apart' as a turning point, a stage where the whole history of Africa had gathered to make a new beginning. The objective that Achebe wished to achieve through his narrative was

exactly the opposite of 'Things Fall Apart' seemed to be everything that Marlow was not: a hero with tragic flaws and attributes that make up humanity. These flaws and attributes were set against the degenerative traits paraded in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' as manifestations of evil seducing a portion of humanity toward its own demise. As a counterpoint, 'Things Fall Apart', with its worlds full of coherent and stable structures was opposed to the fluidity and instability of the Conradian universe. The society one viewed in 'Things Fall Apart' was only postcolonial by name, otherwise it was a society like ours: vibrant, dynamic, and artistic yet flawed. It had men, rituals and conflicts that eventually made it vulnerable to colonial forces. 'Things Fall Apart' as a counterpoint did not merely reverse the binaries set up in a typical colonial text. It went a step further and made the colonized share the flaws and forebodings of the colonizers. Okonkwo was egoistic, impetuous and arrogant; his father was coward and lazy, Okoye was money-minded and talkative while Umoufia as a whole nurtured the fear of darkness and evil-spirits.

Achebe, was not only rewriting Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the past of Africa but was creating a new text after erasing Conrad that could manage to hold writing as civilization. With his writing, purposeful and organized, Achebe wished to release his fellowmen from the lack of ontology into the plenitude of civilization metaphysics. Thus, we witness in 'Things Fall Apart' a counterpoint not merely in terms of ideas, but in terms of writing as well. The features of Achebe's writing were clearly opposed to those of Conrad's. Achebe had purposefulness, clarity and brevity conspicuously absent in Conrad. The Conradian text rushed towards its own evanescence. While Conrad went on postponing the true meaning of his design until the end, Achebes, from the very beginning registered his African presence as the true meaning of his design in a propitious historical moment. Writings of Achebe and Conrad are, indeed, reflects of the two different historical occasions. While Conrad was writing in an era of introspection caused by a relentless pursuit of imperial colonial ambition, Achebe was writing in an era crowded with moments of self-reclamation. Therefore, the postponement of meaning in Conrad's text needs to be examined in the context of his unenviable position where he had to choose between nature and civilization. Achebe had no such problem. Conrad had to finally choose empire as the site of civilization. Achebe had his site readied up by Conrad. One cannot therefore really question the counterpoint status of Achebe's text. In fact, its genesis of Achebe's writing

was laid in the time that separated it from the text of Conrad. In this sense, all African texts were counterpoints of those composed during colonization; almost all of them affirmed and repaired the battered subjectivity of the Africans while narrating their involvement in the presence.

Achebe's response to Conrad could be product of his deconstructive reading that forcefully teased out meanings from a text that finally led to their undoing. Achebe, it is well known, was severely disappointed with certain passages in Conrad's text, passage that was deeply disturbing in harboring racial prejudices of the colonizers. These passages, no doubt, perpetuated binaries leading the reader to view the text as a contested site. Yet they cannot be understood in isolation. One may understand them in terms of their linkages with and dependence upon the concomitant lines and passages. Surprisingly, in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' passages hardly ever ensure the release of meanings. The moment one tries to hold them captive, they pale into significance by the magic current of phrases, passages and lies that undercut each other. Moreover, the fluidity of colonial text is corroborated by the use of parody and irony that subverts the real. It is even more interesting to mark the representation of nature in the text as an alternative to civilization. Conrad sets it up like a wall obstructing one's view of the real. Furthermore, he presents nature in the text only to mock civilized lives whose only significance rests in 'colonizing'. So, Conrad had to choose 'Empire' over' nature'. Marlow returns to the "whited sepulcher' to carry on with the text of civilization as written by the Empire. In Conrad's text, words prevail. They control men and their actions, and by constantly failing to add up, they ensure the collapse of interiority. Even the journey of the characters into the inner station is not a journey beyond text. Rather it is a journey into the textual unconscious. The position of Kurtz in the text of the central metaphor cancels the possibility of one's arrival into trans-textual sites.

In the view of this, it will be equally interesting to mark how Conrad shapes subjectivity, particularly the subjectivity of the colonized other. While the subjectivity of the colonizer lies enmeshed with the words and sentences that fail to add up into meaningful wholes, the creation of the subjectivity of the other takes place beyond text. We witness him as a creature of pure instincts and his responses do not bear the mark of corruption. His regression into the state of prehistory, in fact, redeems him.

Now and then, a boat from the shore gave one momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see them afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks-these chaps; but they had, bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intensity energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast

What seems to be an exercise in voyeurism is in fact Conrad's way of reasserting the alien subjectivity, grotesque yet true. Conrad inspects and examines the colonized bodies, not to claim them as trophies for exhibition, but to stress the underlying solidity of their lives. By perceiving the colonized selves as stable, unified, coherent wholes and distancing them, Conrad seems to be giving shape to the final irony of his text directed at exposing its own limitations as a mediating agent. The horror waiting to reveal itself toward the end of the narrative is a powerful manifestation of this irony that reasserts the impossibility of un-hyphenated existence in the textual world. To deny speech to the colonized is Conrad's way of denying him an entry into the textual world that dehumanizes and corrupts, a way of securing his place in the unconscious realm, the surreal domain in which the text-men lose their way. True, the colonized appear nowhere in the text as conscious subjects responsible for their actions, but then consciousness is an abominable word in the Conradian universe. To gain consciousness is a mark of one's arrival in the textual world. Therefore, the reduction of the colonized to shapes, forms, angles and attitude does not obliterate them. The colonized survives on all fours. Oppression makes their survival resemble a nightmare, but then the comfort of dreaming is also allowed to none. Achebe views colonized existence as divested of all meanings. Yet in the Conradian, universe meanings are found strewn across silences, gaps and nothingness. In this sense, the colonized are closer to meanings while the colonizers despite their words, things and fullness fail to make sense of their surrounding. In 'Heart of Darkness' the colonizers are parodies of their real selves. Lacking

muscle, bone and vitality, they resemble dummies. Marlow respects the chief accounting only to find him resembling a hairdresser's dummy. His only reality is his appearance: starched collar, white cuffs, snowy trousers, a clean necktie and varnished boots. Trappings of appearance are the essential components of his ontology, the achievements of his character, his backbone. We mark here a crucial difference between the subjectivity of the colonizer and colonized. The subjectivity of the colonized is intact yet bound in chains, but the colonizer exists as an assured being. There is something metaphysical about his suffering. While the colonized have regressed to the state of animals finding innocence and harmony, the dehumanization of the colonizers is absolute and final. For the accountant the groan of a sick man is distractive. It prevents him from making the right entries. The colonizers are tougher, but that is what real material are like: 'tough, durable, meaningless and devoid of entrails. Ironically, for the colonial agents, salvation lies in their shape of being consumed by the objects. The agents need rivets not only to repair the steamboat but also to repair their fragmented selves. Moreover, their sole dependence on the fineries of civilization divests their life of any grand purpose. The agents conceive elevation of self and progress of the humankind in terms of the knowledge gained from the grand text of civilization. Surprisingly, text determines their faltering steps into the wilderness. Their responses are textbook responses. They view fright, terror, mystery, beauty and enlightenment in the terms of texts. The rolling of drums and wilderness appear meaningless to them. They are, indeed, not a part of their education or their belief and faith brought upon the principles of Enlightenment. Their education lies in glorifying matter. It propels them towards gold, steel and ivory, objects that finally consume them. Kurtz is their essence, their epitome.

In the failure of Kurtz lies the failure of the grand text of civilization. The essence of Kurtz is the finest rhetoric of civilization, the rhetoric that unmakes him. This, in fact, is the

horrors of horrors: the finest gift of civilization turns out to be its worst curse. The limits of language mar Kurtz. He withers as he spends every bit of his real self: the grand lexicon, the encyclopedia. A life wasted in words. Our recognition of him as a mere voice marks the end of his wordy existence. His final resting place: the muddy hole. This reactivates the conflict between a wordy civilization and a speechless nature. 'Heart of darkness', in this sense, finds its own counter narrative in the colonized, as a construct of nature. Man's existence beyond the text as a potent force is a realization that no text can embody without falling apart. Heart of darkness is then bound to fall apart: the death of a text is the end of civilization. Conrad, however, does not let this happen. He goes on overdrive to devise a strategy that would render the colonized real but ugly; a truth no would like to meet. This is perhaps the only way Conrad could keep the structures of civilization intact. Conrad's strategy can be clearly seen in the return of Marlow to the 'whited sepulcher'. The 'whited sepulcher' is the colonizer's civilization built as a text. For Marlow, knowing the truth is more significant than meeting it. Marlow knows what is what yet he must make a choice by erasing the writing of nature on the palimpsest. The final resolution would lie in falling back on the wisdom gained from 'text'. Wisdom lies in continuing to live within the grand text as its inalienable part, as a tissue of textualities. Conrad the author and Marlow, the narrator would like their audience to return to spaces they are familiar with, spaces within text, spaces in which they have learnt hard lessons of coping with their schizophrenia. Wisdom lies in knowing the truth of 'nature' and yet to choose 'civilization'. Between speechless forms and wordy existence, the latter is the inevitable choice.

'Heart of Darkness', subverts its own texts, so that textuality can survive. While the readers are preparing themselves from the beginning to see the end of texts, Conrad as an author is devising strategies for their perpetuation. Conrad perhaps marks the failure of texts in creating men with

entrails only to work out in the end the necessity of retaining them as the only alternative. This is where, Conrad, as a writer becomes vulnerable to the charges of Achebe. Had Conrad ended his 'Heart of Darkness' at least announcing, if not celebrating, the futility of texts, there would have been no battle. Conrad that way could have pre-empted the counterpoint. But Conrad's decision to keep the text of the civilized and this speechlessness of the colonized at their respective places is what drew the battle line. Achebe takes on Conrad obviously for relegating the 'speechless' into oblivion, while valorizing the wordy existence of the colonizer in the interest of civilization. But then Achebe realizes the importance of text that Conrad renders futile yet accepts as indispensable. A 'text' is inevitable for the speechless too. For the speechless to speak he must own a 'text'. So, Achebe constructs a meta-text, a complex and intriguing yet ready to offer what the colonized needed while making their entry into the world history, a ground to firmly stand on, a past about which they can dream if not return. Achebe did not wish to see the colonized as an ugly reality. Rather he resolved to find a place for them in the inter-textual labyrinth. The character in 'Things Fall Apart' do not construct the beginning of a civilization, rather they are expected to be seen firmly entrenched in a civilization of their own, in a text poised for renewal or for rewriting. Since no reassure is possible, let there be overwriting. But let there be a text. In fact, it was the realization of the indispensability of text that united Achebe and Conrad in the colonial-postcolonial battle field for text. Conrad as part of grand text, sought to perpetuate it even while exposing its failure. Achebe on his turn proposed as African text only to validate the existence of those given up as ugly and redundant, and also to mark their presence in history as conscious subjects. So, in the battle between colonial and the postcolonial, it is 'text' that won. More precisely, the 'texts' won and 'the grand text' lost. And in that sense, one can say that Achebe as the maker of an African text won and Conrad as the

apologist for the' European grand text' lost. But then, no one in Conrad's place could have thought of repudiating the 'grand text'. The very fact that Conrad could render the 'grand text' futile at the height of its power makes his ultimate choice of the 'grand text' of European colonization, a choice made against sensibility and in favor of reason. That too under the duress of imperialism. Marlow returns to the 'Whited Sepulcher' not because he loves it, but because he knows no alternative. Conrad, through Marlow, left behind this message and Achebe knew it. Achebe knew that Conrad had left behind a blank page for him to write on. One hundred years after Conrad's when the alternative presented itself. Achebe picked up the opportunity and a mock battle ensured for 'texts', if not for grand texts. The result of the battle is known.

Now, is there a lesson in that battle, that can inform us in advance of the result of the decisive last round being fought between post modernism and post colonialism? I think yes, there is a big lesson there. The earlier battle was fought between 'a text' and 'the text' the current battle is being fought between 'many texts' and 'non-text'. The postcolonials stand for 'many texts'. The postmoderns stands for 'no text' I think and I hope I have succeeded in persuading you to agree that finally 'Textists' would win hands down over the 'non-textists' I imagine that the void left by the dismantling of the 'grand text' would be filed up by a 'Commonwealth of Texts' membership free. That is the civilization of future.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your attention.