



POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO ECOCRITICAL ISSUES AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.191](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.191)



Article info

Article Received: 21/04/2024

Article Accepted: 29/05/2024

Published online: 05/06/2024

Abstract

Through its fictional portrayal, Achebe's book tries to explain how the Western/Euro-American ecological vision suffers from epistemological myopia because it is marked by a sense of geographical exclusivity and insularity, blatantly ignorant of the postcolonial realities of the environment, and frequently prioritizing an ecological historiography in which colonial history is largely downplayed and human history is reduced to moments of communion with nature. It is argued that ecocriticism, in its eco-philosophical obsession with wilderness preservation and deep ecology, has frequently ended up being reductive and xenophobic. It also failed to understand societies that have developed locally specific and syncretic eco-cultural ethics as well as places where people and nature coexist in close proximity and harmony. This essay suggests a critique of orthodox Euro-American/Western ecological criticism, focusing largely from the viewpoint of a friendly foreigner, and suggests the necessity for postcolonial nations' ecological challenges to be properly historicized.

Keywords: Post colonialism, Western ecological criticism, Colonial Historiography, African culture, colonial hegemony.

"Let them come and see men and women and children who know how to live, whose joy of life has not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live" (Achebe 39)

It is essential to look at how an ecosystem was constructed before the imperialists introduced new realities to Africa in order to better comprehend how imperialism affected

the African ecology. Africa's spirituality often places a high value on nature, and this enables Africans to defend it from any harm. Nature is both a vehicle for human understanding of the supernatural, and the divine, and for a contact between them, and a place for the manifestation of the supernatural powers as well as of the natural forces and elements.

While Achebe's above-quoted statement from *No Longer at Ease* has typically

been interpreted as a counter-narrative to the larger orientalist discourse in which Africa was set up as a foil to Europe, challenging imperial depictions of Africa through negation- by its apparent lack of history, civilization, development and so forth - it is difficult to disregard how the seed of postcolonial writing ecologically was implied in the text. Through its fictional depiction, Achebe's books aim to clarify how Euro-American ecological worldview is afflicted by an epistemological myopia since it is marked by a feeling of regional exclusivity and insularity, being utterly unconscious of its global context. It is feasible to interpret Achebe's fictionalization of post-colonial ecology as a significant intellectual effort to challenge and respond to the eco-theoretical dominance of a specific Western discourse- a discourse that has been positioning itself as the forerunner of global ecocritical consciousness. (Roy 211)

Nature is divine to the Igbo people. According to them, there are divine energies in the trees, rivers, hills, caves, and other natural elements. Earth and fertility were represented by the goddess Ani, the gods of thunder Amadiora, the deity of the harvest Ufiojioku, and the sun god Anyanwu. Igbo had uttermost faith in and obeyed the orders of the Oracle of Hills and Caves. The existence of a large, revered, old silk-cotton tree was mentioned. In the tree, the spirits of decent kids were waiting to be born. Young ladies who wanted children would gather to sit under its shade on typical days (Achebe 47). *Things Fall Apart* serves as proof that colonial control, which rejected the idea of a spiritual connection between nature and people, was the root cause of the act of abusing nature and destroying the environment. In *Things Fall Apart*, colonial exploitation was just commencing; in *Arrow of God*, it got its most aggressive tone. Again, colonial power over the Igbo community of Umuaro, which is the setting for this book, was infiltrating Igbo culture and upsetting their long-held beliefs gradually but definitely. Once more, we see an

Igbo rural community interacting with the natural world. These Igbos' way of life and livelihood were based on natural phenomena. The moon's position in the night sky determined the timing of the Igbo principal food yam harvest and sowing. Ezeulu, the protagonist of the story and the village's top priest was tasked with keeping track of the moon's movement to indicate the passage of time and announce the beginning of the harvest and planting season. Because of the reliance on nature, no harvest or planting would go place if Ezeulu failed to announce the sighting of the new moon. Ezeulu was imprisoned for two months because he refused to be designated as the warrant chief since the colonial lords could scarcely comprehend the significance of his job in society. As a consequence, he was unable to keep track of time or proclaim the start of the harvest season. As a result, when the entire community experienced hunger as a result of Ezeulu's failure to announce the crop promptly, Christian missionaries offered to save them through conversion. The inhabitants were given new life, but because of the influence of Christianity, the yam harvest and planting had to lose their spiritual importance. (Olaiya 1-6)

In addition to Achebe's books, this flavour can also be found in a number of other African novels that sought to expose the destructive connection between the earth and imperialism, as well as how the imagination played a crucial role in the process of decolonization. Such design was evident in Jean Rhys' *'Wide Sargasso Sea'*, where the protagonist is seen to seek solace in nature. In the book, nature isn't only a location; it also acts as a metaphor for the protagonist Antoinette. To highlight the significance of each natural component, the context and surroundings are delineated and explained in great detail. Since Rhys gives nature a role in each scene, each scene in the book is accompanied with a description of nature. We can consider this part as an example- "There was grass on each side of

the path and trees and shadows of the trees and sometimes a bright bush of flowers". (Rhys 28)

The book illustrates how symbiotic the link between people and other species is in the Caribbean land. The novel makes the argument that Caribbean people value the environment and animals more than an Englishman from an industrial nation. These folks value and cherish the natural world and its components. As grateful people, they grasp every chance to express their gratitude for the way that nature has shaped and nurtured their lives. They also incorporate elements of nature and animals into their phrase and language:

"I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him, I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves" (Rhys 112)

"He had the eyes of a dead fish" (Rhys 25)

Another crucial aspect of the novel is the setting or the land, and Antoinette, the protagonist, was impacted by transferring from one house to another since she considers herself to belong to Coulibri. She feels herself completely at home in Coulibri when she says that -

"I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountain. And the barriers of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers." (Rhys 10)

She is in such a perfect harmony that in a scene she firmly believes that any further movement would interfere with the harmonious relationship - "when I was safely home, I sat close to the old wall at the end of the garden. It was covered with green moss soft as velvet and I never wanted to move again. Everything would be worse if I moved." (Rhys 8)

This equilibrium is disturbed by the influx of white men like Mason. He has little regard for the environment since he just cares about his own monetary interests. The major

issue is that this man views women and the environment as his property. She found herself at peace when she was amidst nature. Antoinette might be considered a symbol of nature because of this harmony. Mr. Rochester felt like a fish out of water because he is a native of an industrial nation; he only views nature and women as things to be traded, exploited, and sold. Antoinette, on the other hand, stands in for both nature and a woman who is oppressed and dominated by a man, and Mr. Rochester represents the western man who oppressed and dominates both nature and a woman because of the presumption of his superiority over both the other men and women in his race and gender.

Such an ecological vision- which implied that a knowledge of the land was necessary for an understanding of the historical process of colonialism- was refined and expanded by subsequent theoretical claims made by postcolonial thinkers. The postcolonial critics Frantz Fanon and Edward Said asserted that land was the major locus of postcolonial restoration, sustainability, and dignity and that imagination was essential to releasing land from the confines of colonialism and neo-colonial forms of globalization (Jarrett 155). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, which Fanon wrote in 1961, he said, "for the colonial people the most essential value, the most concrete, is first and foremost the land; the land which will bring them bread and above all dignity" (Roy 212). Edward Said, who had a strong influence from Fanon and Michel Foucault, brought to light how colonial servitude starts with the loss of the land to the outsider by "having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, and their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or more western power." (Roy 212)

This paper makes the argument that postcolonial nations' ecological challenges need to be properly historicized in order to produce a critique of mainstream Euro-American ecological criticism. The first is that, although professing to be mainstream or Euro-American,

for itself to be at the forefront of global ecocritical consciousness, is extremely narrow-minded, to the point where it isolates itself from the ecological consciousness of Non-Western or third-world nations by remaining pre-occupied primarily with environmental issues in Western Europe and North America. Due to their heavy reliance on the British continent's Romantic idealism and America's virgin landscape, ecocritical scholars that emerged in the 1990's have largely negated the significance of the non-western ecocritical inquiry.

Even modern ecocritical research is significantly biased in favour of studying Western ecological texts and concepts; non-western ecocritical research is frequently seen as accidental and tertiary. Because the majority of those involved in mainstream ecocriticism are white, it has not been able to adequately represent the environmental concerns of non-whites or people of other races. In her book *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty asked, "Where are the other voices?" In response to such a question, she argued, "white people have dominated the ecocriticism movement" (Roy 213). An identical statement was made by Lawrence Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) when he stated that "no analysis of environmental imagination can claim to be comprehensive without taking account of the whole variety of historic landscapes and environmental discourse (Buell 8). Although Glotfelty and Buell made such empathetic remarks, ecocriticism has mostly been a rigid theoretical framework that has neglected to take into account the diversity of voices coming from various racial groups, social classes and native nationals.

There are several literary works where Americans themselves extol the beauty of the American countryside. The best example of how nature is viewed as an essential component of human existence is in David Thoreau's "Walden." As a work of environmental literature, Thoreau's *Walden* presents a practical interaction between the natural and human

worlds, where he lived simply without "modern improvements" or what he termed "improved means to unimproved ends." This displays how one places oneself in the natural world and understands nature, and the environmental aspects to cast off materialism. But in its initial period, when the British colonized the American land, the scenario was altogether different.

The actual history of relations between European settlers and the local Native Americans is a far more complicated tale of commerce, collaboration, and bitter struggle as the two cultures melded into America. At the time of the first English immigrants' arrival in New England in the 1600s, there were roughly 60,000 Native Americans residing in the area that would eventually become the New England colonies (Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Haven, and Rhode Island). One of the earliest links between the local Native American communities and the New England colonists was trading. Building the infrastructure and ties they would need to remain and prosper in the New World was important to the colonists. Building possible relationships was a common goal for the Native Americans. But over time, ties between the locals and the now-established colonists grew sour. Smallpox and other illnesses that the English immigrants unintentionally carried over on their ships were some of the issues that the colonists unintentionally introduced. Despite early illnesses of their own, the colonists were mainly resistant to the microorganisms they carried with them to the New World. But there was no such protection among the nearby Native American communities from ailments like smallpox, TB, measles, cholera, and the bubonic plague. According to some Puritan leaders, the disease and annihilation of the Native Americans in New England was a divine intervention to protect the colonists' claim to the land: "[A]bout this time [1631] the Indians began to be quarrelsome touching the Bounds of the Land which they had sold to the English, but God ended the Controversy by sending the

Smallpox amongst the Indians" (Society). Thus, the colonizers nullified the existence of the natives and successfully claimed their authority and superiority.

In one of his well-known poems, "Evolution," the contemporary native American author Sherman Alexie exposed the indigenous' partial agreement for the transfer of their lands and ideals. This poem serves as an example of how native Americans and their culture have been degraded in a systematic manner. Buffalo Bill, a figure in the poem, establishes a pawn store at the border of a reserve for Native Americans. This pawn business was placed on purpose next to a liquor store. He is able to rob the local people of various valuable items in return for cash that they would eventually spend at the liquor store. After everything from the Native American community has been removed, Buffalo Bill renames the store and turns it into a museum dedicated to native American culture. Ironically, he follows up by charging each native American \$5 to enter.

Because Buffalo Bill evokes feelings and images from both White Americans and Native Americans, Alexie's usage of him is crucial. The Native Americans gradually start to lose what they have. What the Native Americans start to pawn off to Buffalo Bill signals a fundamental shift. At first, they pawn tangible items like jewellery and gadgets. This is a representation of the land that the American government received. But then we start to notice how their cultural treasures are sold for pawns. The Native Americans are shown pawning their "pawn their hands, sparing the thumbs for last...their skeletons, dropping continuously from the flesh" (Alexie) after all of the material possessions have been donated.

The scientific advancements and the imperial apparatus of knowledge were used to justify slavery, citizenship denial, and hostility toward non-Europeans. Linnaeus's binomial nomenclature, mnemonic and honorific of the elite Western botany as it was, detaching plants

from their native cultural moorings has been critiqued by Jamaica Kincaid in *My Garden*:

These countries in Europe shared the same botany, more or less, but each place called the same thing by different names: these people would make up Europe were (are) so contentious anyway, that they would not have agreed to one system for all the plants they had in common, but these new plants from far away, like the people far away, had no history, no names, and so they could be given names. (Kincaid 128)

Although officially colonialism weakened with the end of World War II, it really marked the beginning of an era of more continuous and extensive exploitation of the former colonies. Edward Said argued in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that colonialism did not come to an end, rather it changed its form, for "Westerners may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continue to rule morally and intellectually" (Said 63). While the former colonies' ecologies were exploited during the colonial period by metropolitan cities in search of specific material riches to power their Industrial Revolution, during the postcolonial period the colonies were transformed into what Fanon refers to as "an economically dependent country" (Fanon 94) – potentially wealthy regions that could sustain their economy.

The methodically planned nuclear tests by the United States might be seen as a type of careless environmental racism committed against the indigenous Marshallese population, who were treated like simple lab rats. The US opted to continue its Cold War nuclear testing program in the Marshall Islands in search of "empty" test sites. But the island area was not terra nullius; it had been occupied by native peoples for a very long time. When advocating for the relocation of vile industry to non-

Western or postcolonial nations in 1991, World Bank President Lawrence Summers implicitly endorsed a notion of environmental racism:

I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that...I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles . . . Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries? (Nixon 18)

If we consider the recent phenomenon, we should mention the case of Fordlandia (1928), where in order to produce rubber, American industrialist Henry Ford after negotiating a deal with the Brazilian Government, got access to 10,000 km² of land in the Amazon Rainforest. The portion of Amazon where 7,882 organisms could be found on any given five square miles, got wiped out. In 1934, Ford's project failed and the city was abandoned. This might be the finest example of how capitalism and neo-colonialism have harmed ecology. Next is the case of Congo's coltan conflict. Coltan is a black metallic ore that is used to make heat-resistant capacitors in laptops, cell phones, and other high-end electronic devices. 80% of the world's supply of coltan is found in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Coltan exploitation is destroying ecosystems and affecting wildlife habitats. Animals are being displaced from their natural habitats, leaving them vulnerable to poachers. (Reed)

Environmental destruction was not always committed by the colonisers. Following the colonists' departure from their colonies in the postcolonial era, the ecosystem was still being impacted by their imperialistic ideology, which was still pervasive at the time. The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh clearly shows

the myriad aftereffects of imperialism. The natives' attitudes toward the environment changed; instead of wanting to coexist with nature as they had done for centuries, they sought to manipulate it to gain power and wealth. This attitude of dominating 'lesser' things for one's own benefit is distinctly Western. The way the Forest Department is depicted demonstrates how imperialism has corrupted the government as well. These so-called Forest Departments pressured Piya relentlessly for cash while displaying little concern for the ecology. The corrupt administration was also demonstrated in the 'Morichjhapi' incident, where the authorities expelled the "squatters" who had camped there in order to protect the forest for the tigers. In truth however "... 'Morichjhapi' wasn't really a forest even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government for plantations and so on". These components collectively serve to highlight the separation and corruption brought about by imperialism in the Sundarbans (Ghosh 244). Throughout history, colonialism and its counter-discourse have coexisted. Marlowe is shown in Joseph Conrad's most famous book, "Heart of Darkness," as detesting the colonizers' actions and their avarice. As a result, he finds it upsetting to watch black slaves shackled together. Marlowe is seen to be a friendly foreigner. Although his standards are undoubtedly compromised his beliefs remain faithful.

CONCLUSION

"Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter" – J. Nozipo Maraire

This metaphor of postcolonialism lays out a definitive difference between the colonized and the colonizers while indicating history is always written by the victors, not the conquered. Colonial intentions caused centuries of pain and grief as Western powers brutalized their colonies, enslaving their people and pilfering their natural resources. Beyond these

tragedies though, colonizers stole away the ability of the colonized to tell their side of the story with European victors writing the narrative. Distorting history was a strategy used by colonizers against indigenous people.

By incorporating the regional voices, which were typically dismissed as insignificant in their peculiar subjectivity, postcolonial ecocriticism should push for more comprehensive and cosmopolitan ways of approaching dominant Western discourses. This is in contrast to sticking to the Western hegemonic Thoreauvian and Jeffersonian eco-philosophy. A comprehensive and holistic engagement would make the ecocritical theory more capacious. We should therefore consider the fact that the Westerners did never venture out towards the foreign land for the sake of preserving the flora and fauna of the particular place but to vandalize the ecology as per their convenience. Thus, history or the history of ecology to be precise needs to be rewritten from a neutral or omniscient perspective.

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