



## Nature, Women and Igbo Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract

This paper analyses *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe from the angle of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death*. Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that shows how women, nature is being exploited in the patriarchal society. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* too highlights the exploitation of nature in Africa and the women in Igbo community. This paper portrays the spiritual relation between nature and women as well as the problems faced by them.

**Keywords-** ecofeminism, ecocriticism,

### Introduction

Africa was often been hailed as the "Heart of Darkness" (as in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) or as the Dark Continent. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* portrays a comic African who slavishly adores his white colonist boss, to the point of gladly being shot to death by him. Before the advent of the white man, the natives of Africa lived in an atmosphere of untouched beauty and solitude. The whites arrived in Africa to spread Christianity, expand trade, and empire building. They called for coercion used on the natives by euphemism and pacification. The methods of pacification were cruel. Moreover, in the elimination process, the Europeans have caused the displacement of the values and valuable tenants of African Culture. This irreparable loss was time and again lamented by the African writers in their literary

canon. The writers of Africa expressed traumatic colonial experiences, emotional turmoil, and cultural shock and became strongly and also became strongly vocal in venting their protest, conflict, anger, and anguish in poems, plays, and powerful plays.

In 1959, Chinua Achebe published *Things Falls Apart* as a response to white writers like Conrad who treated Africa as a primordial and cultural foil to European Achebe culture and in doing so gave voice to an underrepresented and exploited subject. His novel *Things Fall Apart*'s language was simple yet dignified, brilliant, and innovative, given that most of the earlier writers had relegated African characters to pidgin or inarticulate gibberish.

Chinua Achebe (Nov 16,1930-March 21, 2013) was a Nigerian Novelist, poet, and critic who is widely recognized as the most influential character in modern African literature. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), his debut and magnum opus was a seminal work in African literature and is still translated, studied, and widely read African book. His *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) along with *Things with Apart*, form the so-called "African Trilogy". Further, he wrote *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of The Savannah* (1983). His storytelling combines basic narrative with portrayals and is greatly influenced by the Igbo oral culture. Culture and colonialism, masculinity and femininity, politics, and history are just a few of the topics he addresses in his writing. Achebe received over 30 honorary degrees and the Chinua Achebe Literary Festival honors his Legacy every year.

In the present scenario of environmental degradation, postcolonial writers have come forward to finger out the ills of colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and globalization. William Slaymaker in his essay —*Echoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses* perceives that many African writers' resistance or avoidance of ecocritical paradigms is caused by their suspicion about a Western theory which —appears as" one more hegemonic discourse from the metropolitan West" (Slaymaker. 132) . However, without being called ecocritics, African writers are extremely serious about nature and the environment. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* portrays the spiritual relation between the Igbos and their natural World, the relationship goes beyond the visible physical correspondence set in a village called Umuofia, Achebe portrays nature as another character in the novel by not just keeping it as background. He presents nature as a living entity that is beyond imagination for the Igbos as is visible in their physical activities and mental thinking which are shaped by the surrounding environment. Achebe shows how the Igbo's agricultural life, religious beliefs, festivals, their

ideas about the world, and human life are all intertwined with nature. Achebe further, upholds how due to white colonial power the African culture, and beliefs, fell apart and it created an imbalance in the harmonious relationship between Nature and African culture.

### Nature and African Culture

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* portrays the spiritual relation between the Igbos and Nature and how their Nature and the people of Umuofia co-exist with one another by idealizing the forces of Nature. Nature is presented as a living entity as the lives of Igbos are intertwined with Nature. Achebe describes how the community and individuals observed different activities in different seasons. Igbos maintained strict rules during planting and harvest seasons. They believed that any violation of nature's course would dissatisfy the earth. For instance, maintaining" the Week of Peace" was compulsory before the plantation of yams. Achebe beautifully describes the plantation of yam and the rituals that follow:

Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost. The young tendrils were protected from earth- heat with rings of sisal leaves. As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons, and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the yams, neither early nor late. (26)

The Igbo community believed in maintaining peace at domestic and social levels and keeping the earth satisfied which would ensure good harvest. Therefore, when Okonkwo, the protagonist broke the sanctity of the week by being violent to his wife, he had to face heavy penalties to compensate for the harm he had committed against Nature. The rejoicing time of the Igbo community as well as how

Nature keeps in tune with their excitement and enthusiasm has been portrayed by Achebe in depth:

And now the rains had come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it at the heart of the dry season, without danger to his health. The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for human nature.... At such times in each of the countless thatched huts of Umuofia, children sat around their mother's cooking fire telling stories, or with their father in his obi warming themselves from a log fire, roasting and eating maize. It was a brief resting period between the exacting and arduous planting season and the equally exacting but light-hearted month of harvests (26).

The respect that the Igbos held for their ancestors was evident as the Igbos considered the burial ground their "land", a symbol of respect towards Nature. Achebe narrates "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them... Thus the dead member of the community became part of the land." (122).

For Igbos nature was divine and pure. The trees, rivers, hills, caves, and different other components of the environment held divine power. Some of the deities they believe in are "Ani ", the goddess of earth and fertility, Amadiora, The God of Thunder, Ufiojioku, The God of Harvest, and Anyan Wu, the Sun God. Igbos believed in the oracle of hills and caves and obeyed its command with utmost sincerity. In the book, Achebe describes their respect:

A big ancient silk, cotton tree was sacred spirits of good children lived in the tree waiting to be born. On ordinary days young women who desired children came to sit under it. (46)

Further for the Igbos, divine nature influenced human life from birth to death and even after: any unnatural occurrence like twin babies, diseases like smallpox and leprosy, death by suicide, and so on are submitted to God. For such cases, Igbos had a reserved area called the "evil Foret" where they submitted to Nature. Even Achebe showed how the language of the Igbos was shaped by the landscape as their community had a lot of riddles, myths, and folklore related to Nature. The lives of the people of Igbo people are intertwined with the rhythmic movement of nature. The changing vicissitudes of the climate affect the Igbo community but their lives, social customs, and politics are interrelated with Mother Nature.

#### **Nature and Women: Ecofeminism in Igbo Community**

Ecofeminism is a branch of criticism that seeks to analyze and interpret the relationship between women and nature. It describes movements and philosophies that link feminism and ecology. The term is believed to have been coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* in 1974. Women and nature have an age-old association- an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history. Mary Mellor defines Ecofeminism as;

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit, and oppress women. (1)

Eco-feminists believe that these connections are illustrated 'through

traditionally "female" values such as reciprocity, nurturing, and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature. Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society." (5). Adrian Harris pointed out that "eco-feminists agree that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected and that environmental efforts are therefore integral with work to overcome the oppression of women". Women in the novel *Things Fall Apart*, are seen as an emblem of productivity, fertility, sustenance, peace, and prosperity, and yet they are dominated by patriarchy. The society that Achebe has described is an agrarian one in which crop the 'yam' is synonymous with virility. Achebe describes how wives, yam barns, and social titles- are the highest accolades for the successful farmer, warrior, and man of worth. These determine a man's social status as one of the characters, Nwakibie, possesses all three (yam barns, nine wives, and thirty children) and considers it to be the "highest but one title which a man can take in the clan" (21). Further, the all-important crop- Yam, is "the king of crops" (34-34), and other crops are considered to be women's crops. Okonkwo's mother and sisters work very hard "[...] but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans, and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop." (Achebe 1958: 16). The cultivation of Yam, a man's glory of achievement and the marginalization of women is further by Achebe is discussed in depth:

Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost. The young tendrils were protected from earth-heat with rings of sisal leaves. As the rain became heavier the women planted maize, melons, and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite

periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late. (26)

Juliet Okonkwo, a Nigerian critic cites that Achebe's cultural universe is one in which women are to be seen not heard, coming and going with mounds of foofoo, pots of water, market baskets, fetching kola, being scolded and beaten before they disappear behind the huts of their compound (36).

Ala (Ani), the earth goddess is considered the most important deity in the Igbo community as it is considered the guardian of morality, the God of fertility and harvest, the controller of the minor Gods of fortune and economics, and also works in conjunction with the dead ancestors to order the prohibitions and ritual avoidance. Achebe describes her as

She is in charge of fertility and human mortality. The earth Goddesses are duly pacified when the earth does not produce a rich harvest, as could happen when the land is being defiled (40).

The Week of Peace is being held in her honour and the week is observed in between harvest season and the next planting season. It is believed by the Igbo Community that without the blessings of Ani God, the crops will not grow. Every man is at peace with his neighbour and no evil is committed or violence orchestrated during the period. It was even a taboo for someone to die during the Week of Peace. People only eat and exchange gifts freely with their neighbors. There was always enough to eat and drink in celebration of peace in order to appease the earth goddess for a bountiful harvest. It was this Week of Peace that Okonkwo violated in his readiness to display his bravery and sheer heroism at all times. He had beaten his wife, Ojiugo during the week of peace for her inability to provide his meal at the appropriate time, a duty she abandoned to go and plait her hair. It was Ezeani, the priest on Ani that spelled out the implication of this abominable act to Okonkwo, thereby showing the role, value, and importance of the earth goddess in the lives of

the Umuofia people. He had reprimanded Okonkwo in these words:

'You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops on the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbors. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil.... (24)

He further says

Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her... the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish... (24).

Okonkwo was later to pay a fine of, one hen, a she-goat, a length of cloth, and a hundred cowries which he added on his own a pot of palm wine all meant for sacrifice to the goddess to show how repentant he was. This violation of the Week of Peace with the beating of Ojiugo has a lot of symbolic implications that an eco-feminist critic will find interesting and insightful. This incident is highly symbolic as it throws light on the interrelationship between women and Nature.

### **The clash between the colonial power and Igbo community and Nature**

After giving a complete panorama of Igbos' precolonial life with an attempt to spread Christianity and the missionaries, the encounter between the natives and the white missionary was very casual. The Umuofia society regards the white man as an albino and makes fun of his complexion which is like "a piece of chalk". The second time the white is discussed is when Obierika pays a visit to Okonkwo in exile, at his mother's village, Mbaino, Obierika recounts

how a village named Abame "is no more". When Obierika pays Okonkwo his next he tells his friend,

The white had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages (101).

The harbingers of colonial rule tried to strip nature and all the spiritual meaning held by the Igbos. They tried to be reluctant to follow Christianity by establishing their religion, pagan, but their all-religious beliefs were baseless. In the missionary, Mr. Brown tried to convince that nature did not hold any divine power and there was only God i.e. Christ. He said:

You carve a piece of wood and you call it God. But it is still a piece of wood. (179).

The missionaries said that:

... true god lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for Judgement. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm oil. (102)

The missionaries were given a patch of the "evil forest" by the natives to live in, and the villagers thought that the white man and his followers would die in the forest within four days but they were amazed to see them living and presumed that the "white man's fetish had unbelievable power". Soon the missionaries found converts and the new religion gained power and strength and the Europeans started consolidating their position by bringing their government. Intelligent missionaries like Mr. Brown found various ways to increase the number of Christians in the native societies. He was shrewd enough to restrain himself from a frontal attack and went to work by building a school and a hospital in the village. Achebe cites

the example of Nwoye, as how he was captivated by the song of the new God

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion; something felt in the marrow. The hymn about the brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul- the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. (104)

After the conciliatory methods of Mr. Brown, Mr. James Smith attenuated the strength of the natives even more and finally, the government of the white man arrives in Umuofia and other native societies

It was that the whites had not only brought a religion but also a government. It is said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion, it was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary. (110)

But Okonkwo was a man who loved his native traditions and customs. Near his farm, there was a small house" medicine house" where he kept the wooden symbol of his gods. He worshipped these idols and sacrificed Kola nut, food, and palm wine and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself and his three wives and eight children. In the final scene when Okonkwo hanged himself, putting an end to his life, it was a great offense to nature. His body became evil only strangers might touch it. The Igbos believed that man must be a part of surrounding nature by killing himself did not deserve burial and consequently must be allowed to be a part of nature. By giving a heart-touching portrayal of how Igbos deeply are attached to natural values that were denied by colonial rulers. *Things Fall Apart* stands out as evidence of the act of violating nature and destructing the environment was inspired by

the principles of the colonial rules which did not believe in the spiritual bond between nature and human beings

### Conclusion

Thus, Chinua Achebe asserts the need for power and glory for Africa by making the reader conscious of the weaknesses that are creating hurdles in the way. Achebe portrays "the gradual destruction of a stable, agricultural community by the advent of the white missionaries. He chronicles the decline and break-up of that strong rural tradition which had conserved so much of its cultural tradition." His novels are rooted in the traditional bond of the Igbos in which the people had the social responsibility of cultural transmission. In a famous essay, Achebe writes: 'I would be quite satisfied if my novels ... did no more than teach my readers that their past ... was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them' (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 45). The novel re-enacts" phases of the pre-colonial and colonial traditional order of African history by featuring the beginnings of some significant moments of nationalist ideological crises in the communities of Umuofia and Mbanta. But it also teaches that these traditional societies were internally harmonious and were also in harmony with their ecosystem". (163)

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