

Distorting the Cultural and Environmental Integrity through Invasion: An Ecocritical Post-Colonial Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: Ecocriticism and Post-Colonialism are the offshoots of post structuralism. Both these literary theories are new in origin and interconnected with each other. Postcolonialism developed out of the reaction in the earlier colonies against the imperial masters. The indigenous writers started writing back to the centre which had dominated their every sphere of life for centuries. The master-narrative has portrayed the indigenous people of the colonies in a very derogatory way. The natives were represented as savages and uncivilised, hence the coloniser tries to justify its presence there by calling it 'His' burden to rectify the 'unethical' and immoral practices of these primitive people. Like postcolonialism, Ecocriticism also developed out of the love and concern regarding the natural world in its totality. Ecocriticism tries to make the bond between the nature and social world very strong. It proclaims that Nature should not be deteriorated at the cost of human materialistic demands. Ecocriticism Post-Colonialism provides us the lenses to look deeper into the genesis of Cultural and Environmental degradation by the White rulers on the pretext of development and modernisation. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe portrays the impact of colonialism on the human and non-human entities in a realistic and accurate manner. This paper would try to explore how the unique culture and environment of Africa was exploited by the colonial rulers. It would also compare the pre-colonial African society with the Colonised Africa and the changes which were brought by the imperial rulers by close textual reading of *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: Culture, Environment, Land, Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism.

Representation of Igbo Culture and its disintegration by Colonialism

The novel *Things Fall Apart* is written by the African author Chinua Achebe. It got published in 1958 and its title has been derived from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming". The novel has been divided into three parts and depicts the life of Igbo people in pre and post colonial periods during the nineteenth century. The first part describes the customs, rituals, culture and history of the Igbo society, while the second and third part describe the impact of imperialism and Christian missionaries on Okonkwo and his community. Most of the story takes place in Umuofia and revolves around the rise and fall of Okonkwo. Umuofia is an independent and agrarian society which produces enough to fulfil its needs but the intrusion of imperialism disrupts the balance. They are content with what they have and are hospitable by nature, they always give a warm welcome to their guests and live in co-operation with each other. Chinua Achebe does not idealise the indigenous culture but reveals that African society had its own contradictions and spiritual crisis before the encroachment of colonialism. About this novel Booker writes, "Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is worthy of close analysis not simply because it offers insight into the purely structural or syntactic dynamics of European colonialism, but also because of its visionary exploration ... of the pre-colonial people" (01).

Okonkwo is the protagonist of the novel who struggles to preserve the cultural integrity of his society against the inordinate power of colonial rule. He has achieved much in life in a very young age and is well known in the suburbs of Umuofia for being a wrestling champion, a wealthy farmer and a member of the select Ekwugwu. He is sturdy, hardworking and shows no sign of feminine nature, these qualities are respected in the Igbo community which is an androcentric society where the man is everything and woman nothing. He has a strict adherence to the village customs and believes that he would never be a true man unless he is able to dominate the household and his wives. His human nature only comes to the surface level when he abandons eating for three days after killing Ikemefuna.

Achebe portrays numerous tenants of Igbo culture which encompasses their religious beliefs, their family and social relationships and belief in evil spirits. Art, music and poetry has been presented in a very distinguishing manner which are the main pillars of the African culture. The novel also explores the non-religious aspects of Igbo culture. Men mostly have more than one wife and dozens of children. Their everyday life revolves around caring for crops. Yam is their staple food crop and men are in charge to cultivate it, while women grow several other kinds such as melons and beans.

An important aspect of Igbo society is the lack of centralised political structures. They live in clans and every clan has its own leader, but they share their ceremonies with each other hence promote harmony and mutual co-operation. Achebe has not just presented the beauty of the Igbo culture but the flaws that are in it has also been depicted to show both the positive and negative aspects of the Igbo society. There are brutal traditions and practices in the Igbo culture such as murdering the twins, polygamy, oracles, indiscriminate war and the pathetic condition of women. In Igbo culture if a person suffers from swelling of limbs and

stomach he is not allowed to die in his house. It will displease the Earth goddess if such a person dies in the village. They are taken to the Evil Forest to die there like an animal. Okonkwo's Father also dies in the Evil Forest.

It is because of these cruel practices that the White rulers consider the Igbo culture devoid of ethics and moral codes of conduct. The missionaries had come with the seemingly noble purpose of urging the tribal people to forego their barbaric, savage culture and embrace the peaceful religion of the Christianity. They built churches in various villages to propagate the Christian teachings and attracted a large number of people to their religion. The number of converts increased day by day who in turn became bitter enemies of their brothers and the conflict between the two became a matter of routine. Obierika become depressed to see the division among his community, he observed, "Our own men and sons have joined the ranks of strangers. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (Achebe 129). However, the real disintegration of Igbo society begins when the British rulers established its governmental institutions like courts, prisons and regulations for trade and commerce. The government began to enforce its laws, those who do not abide by the Whiteman's laws were put behind the bars.

The leaders of Igbo society assembled together to discuss about the deceiving nature of the imperial rulers, meanwhile a government messenger announces their meeting as illegal. Okonkwo lost his patience and killed the officer and afterwards committed suicide knowing that his clansmen would not cooperate with him in fighting against the cruel rulers. His death meant the collapse of Igbo culture and the victory of British rulers. The external power succeeds in shattering the Igbo culture by spreading its own religious and political ideologies which are considered as superior and advanced. Ernest N. Emenyonu rightly contend that,

"*Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization." (Whittaker, p. 59).

Ecocritical Concerns in *Things Fall Apart*

William Ruckert coined the term Ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay, "Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism" which refers to the approach of studying literature by considering the ecological concerns of the environment. In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe depicts the spiritual affinity between the Igbos and their natural world, which goes beyond the visible physical correspondence. Igbos consider nature Divine which held unlimited powers. *Ani*, *Amadiora*, *Ufiozioku* and *Anyanwu* are the gods and goddesses of Igbo society who protect the nature. They have maintained ecological equilibrium by not harming the environment in any way, exploiting the nature for their own financial gain is unimaginable for the Igbos. Their myths, festivals and religious beliefs all are inspired and intertwined with nature. They believe that if one person violates the divine law then the entire clan will suffer natural disaster.

Igbos maintain strict rules during the planting and harvest season. Before the planting season, they observe a 'week of peace' to please *Ani* the goddess of earth so that She might bless them with good crops. During this week, people did not work. They visit the families of their friends and spend most of their time in talking, gossiping, eating, drinking and marry making. Even saying a harsh word to anyone is consider as sin, if a person dies during this week, he/she is not buried but thrown into the Evil Forest to rot in the open. No one dares to do anything contrary to the norms of this festival and if anyone goes against, he has to suffer a heavy penalty imposed by *Ezeani* the priest of earth goddess *Ani*. Okonkwo once broke the sanctity by beating his second wife Ojiugo and was ordered to bring one goat, some cloth and a huge amount to the holy place of *Ani* as a sign of repentance.

The Igbo people also observe the new yam festival to honour the earth goddess and the spirits of their ancestors, which they believe are the important part of the natural world. The festival not only catered to the needs of eating, drinking and marry-making but also develop intimacy among the Igbo community. A large number of guests are invited from far and near by wealthy farmers, in-laws also get special invitations. This occasion provides them an opportunity to exchange their views for a better understanding. Uchendu explains the philosophy of this festival by saying, "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes... we come together because it is good for the kinsmen to do so" (Achebe 118).

After presenting a complete picture of the precolonial Igbo culture, Achebe shows how the imperial rulers diminished the philosophy of the indigenous people. The natives have a subjective relationship with the land while as the external rulers consider the land as a resource, which they used to build their institutions and buildings. The trees were cut down to build the church buildings. The Igbos consider Pythons as sacred and divine, but the missionaries motivated them to kill the python by regarding it a mere snake. Oduche killed the python and started the man versus wild conflict.

Achebe demonstrates how the geography influenced the Igbo language. As an oral society, Igbos used variety of oral methods in their discussion such as riddles, sayings, myths, proverbs and so on. Okonkwo's growing popularity is compared to the bush-fire, Obierika's busyness to the anthill etc. Achebe combines a multitude of myths and traditional folk takes like the mosquito myth, locust myth, quarrel between Earth and Sky and the tale of Tortoise and birds. All these are evidences of love of Igbo people for their landscape. About this aspect DeLoughrey observes, "The post colonial ecology of *Things Fall Apart* is evident in the way that language develops in a long historical relationship to a particular environment and culture" (07).

In the name of development, the colonizers destroyed the environmental resources like forests, hills, rivers etc. Constructing roads through the dense forests lead to the cutting of numerous trees, which ultimately affects the lives of wildlife species. The colonizers used their power and knowledge to dominate every field of African communities and deprived them of their own ways of living. They successfully robbed them of their riches and degraded their environment for their own material benefits.

Conclusion

Although ecocriticism and postcolonialism are two separate fields of study while one deals with the environment the other deals with the people. One cannot discard the fact that colonialism influences both people and places synchronously. When one region is colonised, it means the whole biosphere of that region is colonised. *Things Fall Apart* represents the intimate relationship Igbo people had with the natural surroundings before things started to fall apart because of colonialism. Obierika one of the important characters in the novel said that the whites have “put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart”. The sense of oneness with nature and the balance that sustained the community has totally disappeared. The novel portrays what the critic Ato Quayson has called “the struggle between an organic esthetic...indigenous to the culture and an esthetic... that comes with colonialism” (833). Through his narrative technique, his use of time, command of language and usage of proverbs and metaphors, Achebe has succeeded in portraying the manner in which the society got agitated and the land became contaminated. At the end the natives fail to preserve their age-old relationship with the nature and surrenders before the colonial rulers.

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