

GOING GREEN: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S
THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject, the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical discourse, it deals with literature on the one hand, and land on the other. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology 'everything is connected to everything else', we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world, in some aesthetic ether, but rather plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact'. This essay looks at the ecology of Umuofia, and in fact the entire setting of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The theoretical framework of this paper is anchored on Ecocritical theory.

Introduction

The ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in the novel? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in the work consistent with ecological wisdom? How do metaphors of the land influence the way it is treated in the work? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? What

bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? (Glotfelty and Fromm: 1999). These are the many concerns of scholars and critics of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism and environmental literature are recent developments in literary history. Literature of all kinds, whether preliterate oral or postcolonial pastoral, nature, landscapes and praise poems about homelands are abundant in African as well as all among the Diasporic Africans. Since about 1960, however, greater concern for deforestation, water and air pollution and a host of major environmental problems have begun to take precedence over the loss of a sentimental connection to farm or village which have been the themes of nature writers. Ursula K. Heise has defined the scope of Ecocriticism as an analysis of the ways in which literature represents the human relations to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural, shape literary tropes and genres (1097).

However, Achebe in his bid to correct the misrepresentations of Africa by the white imperialists insists that Emmanuel Obiechina is right when he says that 'the purpose, implicit or explicit' of the African writer is 'to correct the distortion of West African culture, to create the past in the present in order to educate the African reader and give him confidence in his cultural heritage' (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 117). In his essay, 'Publishing in Africa', Achebe notes that what the African writer must do is draw on the 'spiritual bond that exists between the true artist and his community to take himself and his readers into a meaningful future' (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 87). Achebe also says in 'Named for Victoria', that the African writer could draw on the tradition of folk story-telling which 'had the immemorial quality of the sky and the forests and the rivers' (101). In his 'The Novelist as Teacher', Achebe insists that it is also his 'business as a writer to teach' any African boy with an inferiority complex induced by colonial stereotyping about his world to believe 'that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry' (58).

Things Fall Apart sets out as a response to the denigration of Africa in colonial novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

((1899) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939). Achebe goes beyond the colonial depiction of grunting 'savages' and 'cannibals with no language or cultural and historical links to their physical environment (Msiska 2008: i). He says that if you are a colonialist:

You construct a very elaborate excuse for your action. You say, for instance, that the man in question is worthless and quite unfit to manage himself or his affairs.... If the worse comes to the worst you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. (4)

The Europeans in the colonies, tried to institutionalize the lives of Africans. The Africans were therefore dislocated from their rich cultural heritage, and a regimented life put in place by the whites to replace the indigenous traditional African life style. The colonizer labelled Africans barbaric, and presented his own culture as elevated and civilized.

Part of the reason Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* was to portray the African ideal of a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural environment. He set out to capture a serene and tranquil traditional society full of love for one another and showcasing people living peacefully with natural elements. This is seen as what encapsulates the overall effect of Achebe's perspective on the African's links with the land, so as to make his African readers realize what it was to dwell in a harmonious relationship with the physical environment. This has therefore heightened what we would now term ecological consciousness; that is to say, the African's sensitivities about the importance of preserving the intimate link between the land and themselves.

The thesis I posit in this paper is that Achebe, in writing this novel wanted his African readers to be aware of the extent of the embeddedness of their forefathers in the environment. I will thereafter, attempt to do an ecocritical reading of *Things Fall Apart*. I will also elaborate on his depiction of the colossal damage caused in the relationship between Africans and their natural world by the advent of colonization. Among the things that fell apart in the continent with the coming of the white colonialists was the unique relationship between the African and his natural environment.

Ecocriticism has been defined by Lawrence Buell in his *The Environmental Imagination* as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis. Buell acknowledges that there is some uncertainty about what the term exactly covers but argues that:

If one thinks of it ... as a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field (2001: 20).

Buell's definition is apt, as far as it goes, and it continues both in the increasingly interdisciplinary tradition of inclusiveness and making connections and in maintaining an ethical stand for effecting change.

In the *Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' and compares it with other activist methodologies such as Marxist and feminist criticisms (1999: xviii). By comparison with other forms of criticism, there has been little dispute about the moral and philosophical aims of ecocriticism, although its scope has broadened rapidly from nature writing, Romantic poetry, and canonical literature to theatre, film, history, scientific narratives, and an extraordinary range of literary texts.

Micheal P. Brand in his *Reading the Earth*, argues that, implicit in much of this 'new' criticism is a call for cultural change. Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include non-human life forms and the physical environment. Just as feminist and African American literary criticism call for a change in culture, so too does ecological literary criticism advocate a cultural change by examining how the narrowness of our culture's assumptions about the natural world has limited our ability to envision an ecologically sustainable human society.

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental

premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. *Ecocriticism Reader* was the first of its kind: an anthology of ecocritical essays devoted to organizing an area of study, whose efforts had, until the early 1990s, not been 'recognized as belonging to a distinct critical school or movement' (Glotfelty xvi-xvii).

Earth and Weather in *Things Fall Apart*

The degree to which the Umuofia people co-exist, and accord respect to nature and the natural elements is seen in their idealizing the forces of nature. Some of the deities they believe in, include, the goddess of the earth 'Ani', which is in charge of fertility, the goddess of the sky and thunder bolt, 'Amadiora, and the pillar of water, 'Idemmili', whose totem is the sacred python. The most important of all the deities in religious and social life of the people is 'Ani', the Earth deity. Certainly, the goddess of the earth is held in higher esteem than all the other deities.

In illustrating the concept of deities further, Achebe talks about the importance of the Oracle in the lives of the people. In the Igbo culture, an oracle is understood as one of Chukwu's auxiliaries, who plays significant roles in the lives of the people. For example, before going to war, the people are expected to consult with the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, as this would ensure success for them. The Oracle pleads to Chukwu on their behalf.

Things Fall Apart is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The novel presents a vivid picture of Igbo society, particularly of the Ogidi community (to which I belong) whose pseudonym in this text is Umuofia, at the end of the nineteenth century, and the turn of the twentieth century. Achebe goes back to the generation of his father, and perhaps his grandfather, and presents an apocalyptic scenario of the destruction of the social customs, political structures, religion, even seasonal festivals and ceremonies of his people. As Achebe

himself said 'the characters are normal people and their events are real human events' (Lindfors 1991: 21).

Achebe depicts an ecological disaster, where the elements went hay-wire in a particular year; there was excessive rainfall, which led to flooding. He narrates:

But the year had gone mad. Rain fell as it had never fallen before. For days and nights together it poured down in violent torrents, and washed away the yam heaps. Trees were uprooted and deep gorges appeared everywhere The yams put on luxuriant green leaves, but every farmer knew that without sunshine the tubers would not grow. That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself (19).

The seasons and the weather conditions control the lives and affairs of the people in Umuofia, Mbanta, and the adjoining villages. While Okonkwo is in Mbanta, his maternal home, where he runs to, for refuge after, inadvertently killing a kinsman, which is 'female *ochu*', his wives along with other women engaged in treading red earth to build walls. The vagaries of the weather controlled the periods during which homestead walls would be erected to ensure that they stand. It is described thus:

The last big rains of the year were falling. It was the time for treading red earth with which to build walls. It was not done earlier because the rains were too heavy and would have washed away the heap of trodden earth; and it could not be done later because harvesting would soon set in, and after that the dry season (130).

The lives of the people are intertwined with the weather, the climate, and the seasons of the year. No one would embark on a course of action without considering the season of the year, and the attendant implication on the said action.

Okonkwo becomes a well-respected man in the community, simply by being a successful farmer. He does not have a head start in life like others because his father, Unoka, is said to be a lazy man. However, by sheer hard work, Okonkwo rises from grass to grace, to become a very influential man in his community; an ozo title

holder, with three wives, many children, and a very big yam barn. He starts off with share cropping. He had to borrow eight hundred yam seedlings from Nwakibie, a rich and highly respected man in the community. Okonkwo is nearly forced by the weather to return to poverty:

That year that Okonkwo took eight hundred seed-yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rainclouds and lay awake all night But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed (18-19).

The changing vicissitudes of the climate almost wreaks irreparable damage on the economic fortunes of Okonkwo. Later with Climate change and improved weather conditions, he continues his steady rise on the ladder of economic advancement.

Ecological Symbols

Umuofia is in intimate embrace with the environment, farm lands, the land, river and the entire ecology. It identifies class and social status but has a high degree of interrelatedness and interconnectivity, which cannot be seen in industrialized cities. The markets, the farms, the village square, the shrines of the various deities, and the people are all engaged in a severe and harmonious interrelatedness with nature. The land is revered in Umuofia community.

The Earth (Ani) is a symbol of fertility. Any offence committed against Ani is treated with utmost gravity. The harvest season is a period of giving thanks to Ani for a bountiful harvest. The plants,

crops, and the entire vegetation are regarded as special gifts from the earth 'Ani'. Achebe captures this succinctly:

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth (29).

So intense is the relationship between the people of Umuofia and their environment, that, before crops are planted during the planting season, a 'week of peace' is observed. During this period, people are expected to live peaceably and in harmony with one another. It is therefore, sacrilegious for Okonkwo to disrupt this harmonious 'ecosystem', by beating up his youngest wife in this week of peace. Ezeani, the chief priest of Ani, subsequently berates Okonkwo, saying:

You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. 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. He brought down his staff heavily on the floor. 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. His staff came down again. 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 is made to appease the earth goddess whom he has offended with relevant sacrifices. In this symbiotic relationship between the Umuaro people and the environment, the flora and the fauna are all inclusive. It is therefore not allowed for any member of Umuofia community, and the adjoining villages to kill or abuse the sacred python. When the over-zealous Christian-convert Okoli does this, he does not live to tell the story; as seen here:

They say that Okoli killed the sacred python, said one man. It is false, said another. Okoli was not there to answer. He had fallen ill on the previous night. Before the day was over he was dead. His death showed that the gods were still able to fight their own battles. The clan saw no reason then for molesting the Christians (129).

Similarly, no one is permitted to harm or kill himself. Against this back drop, when Okonkwo commits the mortal sin of taking his own life, the earth rejects him. His kinsmen could not cut him down from the tree, and give him a decent burial. So, Obierika implores the district commissioner:

We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land (165).

Due to the closely knit relationship between the people of Umuofia and their environment, it is impossible to accord a befitting and dignified burial to a man who has sinned against the land. Based on that, strangers were contracted to throw Okonkwo into the evil forest. It is quite unfortunate to note that despite all his fears of being thought weak, his physical prowess and sheer hard work, Okonkwo dies a more dreaded kind of death than his father, Unoka.

Okonkwo's sojourn in Mbanta for seven years has cost him his role and relevance in his village. He reflects on how his people must have forgotten his bravery and prowess in these terms:

Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan (137).

This disillusionment foreshadows the events that unfold on his return to Umuofia that finally culminates in his suicide.

Conclusion

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. *Things Fall Apart* is therefore about a clan which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared a common awareness, and acted like one. The arrival of the white man as a missionary, trader and administrator, disrupts the unity of this erstwhile serene, peaceful and unified agrarian community locked in a warm embrace with nature. 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 story 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.

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