

## **An Ecocritical Perspective of Colonialism and Environmental Degradation in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

**Chukwujekwu Oraziuka<sup>1</sup>, Sylvanus Onyeachulam<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of English Language and Literature  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University  
Awka, Nigeria

**Corresponding author**  
Chukwujekwu Oraziuka  
Phone: +2347060608530  
Email: cc.orajiuka@unizik.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Ecocriticism is the study of literature in relation with environment and nature. Ecocriticism tries to find possible solution to correct contemporary ecological situation by analyzing the ways nature and environment are represented in literature. The bringing together of ecocriticism and postcolonialism has given a new impetus to the whole critical thought where the ideas of race, land, environment, wilderness etc. are given new insight. This paper aims to analyse the dichotomy between colonialism and environmental degradation, which is presented in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The paper maintains that colonialism and modern development destroy the nature and native culture. The main mission of colonizers is to create political, imperial, and economic hegemony over the country. However, it has negative impact on nature, forestry, animal kingdoms, and cultural wilderness. For the theoretical perspective, the paper borrows ideas from Cheryll Glotfelty and Greg Garrard's about ecological consciousness and environmental literature. The paper concludes that colonialism through its infrastructural development caused deforestation and loss of natural and cultural wilderness. Such an examination is intended to establish that, while the pre-colonial African society lived in an inviolate state of nature, it was colonialism that opened the door for exploitation of nature, ignoring or denigrating the deep meanings that nature and environment held for the African people in the pre-colonial period.

**Keywords:** Ecocritical, Colonialism, Environmental, Degradation, Exploitation.

## Introduction

Ecocriticism is a recent evolution in the area of literary appreciation. Evolved first in the US and then in UK, it gained a momentum only during the 1990s. From the very inception, ecocriticism has been based on the assumption that human world and the physical environment are closely interlinked and that one is shaped by the other and therefore the study of the representation of human-nature relationship in literature is of utmost important to understand the environmental predicament of today's world. William Rueckert was the first person to have used the term 'ecocriticism' in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in

Ecocriticism' (1978). He defined the term as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. However a remarkable book came out in the year 1996 which gave a new turn to the whole movement of ecocriticism. It was *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Published with a number of articles with themes of nature and environment, this book established itself as a milestone in ecocriticism. Here Glotfelty gives the oft-quoted definition of ecocriticism:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Thus, ecocriticism is based on the idea that the physical world and the human culture are connected and are affected by each other. It examines the relationship between the human and the non-human represented in literary texts. Ecocritics study the ways nature is portrayed in the body of the text and attempt to analyze their relevance with environmental crises. Hence the study of nature is directed towards an understanding of the imbalance of the eco system in the contemporary world.

The present-day environmental predicament is a sure result of the age-old practice of exploitation of nature and abuse of the environment for the benefit of human civilization. While the reshaping of nature has been executed throughout human history, the episode of European colonialism is the most outstanding example of human interference with nature as the whole enterprise of colonization was based on the idea of exploiting nature and its resources. The Western cultural tradition of using nature

for human benefits was most strongly propounded through colonialism. In fact, it is not only during the era of colonization, but the practice against nature is being carried out in the neocolonial period in the present day circumstances. Therefore the blame for environmental crisis falls primarily on the West as it is inspired by the Western principle of separation of the human from the non-human. This very point calls for analysis of ecological concepts in literature from a postcolonial perspective. The ever broadening horizon of ecocriticism has broadened its potentiality by its —cross-pollination with postcolonial studies (Buell. 93) and this merger has provided a deeper understanding of the issue of environmental degradation in present age.

The convergence of postcolonialism with ecocriticism is justified from the point that colonial exploitation of nature was inspired by European Enlightenment philosophy, knowledge of nature, conservation policy etc.

and therefore to deny colonial and environmental histories as mutually constitutive misses the central role the exploitation of natural resources plays in any imperial project. (DeLoughrey. 10) Though postcolonial criticism has been anthropocentric from the beginning, the devastating impact of neocolonialism over the ecosystem of non-European nations has made postcolonial studies discover its commitment to the environment, reiterating its insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse (Huggan 702). So, ecocriticism without postcolonial perspective would mean to study only the tip of the iceberg while the history of colonialism has hidden inside it the genesis of the problem.

In the present scenario of environmental degradation, postcolonial writers from non-European nations have come forward to

finger out the ills of neocolonialism and globalization. In Africa, a number of writers and critics, without the stamp of ecocritics, have traditionally been engaged in nature writing, highlighting land issues, environmental evils, studying them as the result of the long history of colonialism. William Slaymaker in his essay 'Ecoing 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 (132) and because African writers do not expect any Western theory to solve their environmental problems. However, without being called ecocritics, African writers are extremely serious about nature and environment. Niyi Osundare and Ken Saro Wiwa, both belonging to Nigeria, were famous writers along with being committed eco-activists.

From such perspectives, the position of Chinua Achebe is not easy to define. Though Achebe has not shown any apparent awareness towards ecological crisis in his writings, his novels, mainly *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1965) bear sufficient proof of the writer's addressing the theme of nature and environment. While the first novel is set in the pre colonial Igbo land of southeastern Nigeria, the second novel has the early colonial period as its backdrop. Accordingly, the first novel gives a picture of nature and environment in their inviolate state, and the second novel shows the violation of the same due to colonial invasion.

### **Ecocritical Perspective and Development:**

#### **A Theoretical Perspective**

Nature is such a prominent element that no one can go beyond the force and process of it. It has its own cycle and course that every

creation and its system moves with itself. It is like the mother which creates and grooms every creature. It makes an environment for every creature. Ecosystem functions to support one animal and plant to the next. For a couple of centuries, this system is gradually being disturbed and the whole ecosystem is getting disturbed. In the pre-modern culture of human civilization, there was a system to worship nature, earth, and creation as the Igbo people in Nigeria worshiped *Ani*, the earth goddess. But in the modern and post-modern time, this system has been disturbed a lot due to many reasons such as population explosion, wars, deforestation, development works, construction, pollution, and many others. This phenomenon also entered into academia because of the seriousness of the problems and their terrible results on human life. This issue has become the content of literary writing and criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The critics like Michael P. Branch, Karl Kroeber, and Harold Fromm began the ecocritical problems in their writings. But critics like Cheryl Glotfelty and Peter Barry used this term as a new branch of literary criticism, which got its lexical identity in the dictionary of critical theory. Greg Garrard in the context of ecocriticism argues that "the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of human and non-human throughout cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term" (5). As there is a relationship between humans and nature, nature is exploited ruthlessly by humans. The ecocritics consider nature as an object which is terribly exploited like the lower class for the Marxist critics. Nature is available equally to all in the world, but it is badly exploited and destroyed by humans. The ecocritics consider nature and women both the creator and deserve the nurturing quality. In this world, women are exploited much in many ways economically, culturally,

physically, sexually, and politically. Due to the exploitation of nature, there are multiple serious problems like the greenhouse effect, global warming, the collapse of many species of plants and animals, and climate change. Among many causes of environmental degradation, political reasons like colonialism and imperialism are also the prominent ones. In this case, Ramchandra Guha argues that colonialism and capitalism have a connection with deforestation, arguing that the colonial methods of forest working are always in the monopoly principle. It is always exploitative and the result is deforestation (62). It is the main purpose of the colonial powers is to exploit the raw materials and natural resources so that deforestation is inevitable. He further argues that there is a contradictory relation between the sustainable use of natural resources (62). Similarly, Stephen Mosley claims that "croplands, dams, mines, roads, buildings, and other developmental activities are

reshaping the face of the earth at an unprecedented rate" (1). Thus, colonialism, modernization, and development works are the major factors against natural and cultural heritage.

### **Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Critical Analysis**

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* chronicles the falling apart of the native and pure culture of Igbo people in the land of Umuofia and the neighbouring villages. Before and after the arrival of the white man as missionaries, the situations of cultural purity gradually fell down, including the cultural, religious, and historical unity of the village and the community. They also include the grip of Okonkwo, which is lost leading to the tragic fall of the character. This cultural, religious, and attack on history is the colonial attack on the native Igbo people. Not only it is the theme of cultural and historical fall of these people, but there lies the fall of environmental and ecological as well, which

is strongly depicted in the novel. The novel exemplifies the land, people, and animals in the same trinity of interaction. Land and animals are part of the environment in which the human being is crucial to supporting or destroying them. In this regard, Achebe describes in the novel: 'A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another' (161). Therefore, the human being is movable from here to there, but the environment or the soil is always there. Similarly, when the tail of a lizard is lost, very soon it gains another. This statement in the novel signifies the very close relationship between human, nature, and animals.

The novel is mostly studied from the perspective of Nigerian Igbo culture. The culture, language, unity of the people, and villagers were pure and intact in the half part of the novel, but every unity has fallen into fragments in the second half as the title itself

suggests, things fall apart. Linda Strong Leek observes the novel from the perspective of gender relations. The gender dynamics attracts the readers of the novel as she claims, “These formerly peripheral characters may be afforded proper critical attention by male/female readers of this great African novel” (33). This comment focuses on the gender studies of the novel. The novel is a neo-historical text of the imperial narrative of history of Nigeria (50/51) that is the perspective of Alison Searle.

Abiola F. Irele reads the novel as a document of Nigerian culture and social values. The society is shown like a utopia before but it has fallen apart with the materialistic utilitarian progress. He writes, ‘The utopianism of Achebe’s fiction as it begins to declare itself in *Things Fall Apart* has a broader scope than is suggested by materialistic and Utilitarian preoccupation of nationalism’ (27). The issue of nationalism and cultural spiritualism is the focus of this paper. The novel is a record of

rural life, language, stories, and proverbs. It is a good record of Nigerian proverbs with a conclusion of Irine Goshkheteliani. The critic claims, ‘Proverbs not only represent features of national characters, but they bear a print of an originality of the figurative system historically developed’ (3). Therefore, this novel is mostly studied and analysed from the cultural, social, and environmental perspective. However, the discussion above suggests a research gap that political invasion destroys the natural and cultural heritage. This study attempts to fulfill this research gap by connecting political imperialism, and natural and cultural environment.

Reading ecology and its aspects in the literary text is one of the most prominent aspects of literary criticism. The main objective of this paper is to examine the result of politics with environment though they sound unrelated, having no any connection between humans and nature. In this regard, Gitanjali Gogoi argues that ‘ecocriticism is the study of the



relationship between literature and physical environment' (1). She comments on the novel as a reading of rivers, hills, trees, stones, farmhouses, barns, storehouse, culture, tribes, and legends of Nigeria (4). The ecocritical issues are raised and listed in the literary texts as the main concern of ecocritical reading. In the present world, the issue of the environment is prominent everywhere and in literature too it gets enough space now. This paper has maintained that human activities cause natural and cultural degradation. The Nigerian people had their cultural and natural purity before the arrival of white people. The people believed in *Ani*, goddess for the mother earth. They believed in their *chi* the horoscope according to their culture. *Ani* is the goddess of the earth, which has feminine qualities like the mother earth and creative nature. But, such cultural property has been gradually collapsed after the cultural colony of the white men.

In Chapter 15 of the novel, a white man arrives for the first time in the village. The man comes riding an iron horse. He says, "During the last planting season, a white man had appeared in their clan... and he was riding an iron horse" (130). This iron horse (bicycle) is the turning point from naturalness to artificiality against the purity of the environment. Life before the white man's arrival was pure, based on oracles, believing in the *chi* (god), yam and coco plantation, and many more ecologically friendly lifestyles. It seems that the natives are seen as scared of the arrival of the white man. Obierika, one of their close friends Okonkwo, says, 'We have heard stories about a white man who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas' (132). This gun is not only scary for the people but it is also for the natural and wild animals in the jungle, so the arrival of the white man threatens the natural animals that live in the ecosystem.

When the missionaries came to the village Umuofia, they planned to build a church building and demanded a piece of land from the villagers. They had land called an 'evil forest' where the villagers use to bury the people who died due to some evil disease. The event is narrated in the following words: 'It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries...let us give them a portion of the evil forest' (140). They have the expectation that the white people would die soon when they go to the evil forest to construct their church buildings. The villagers offered the white people as much land as they could, which is the most evil work from the point of view of environment. Very soon the white people began to cut down the trees there and build their church buildings. The author describes the situation in this way: 'The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their houses' (141). Unlike their expectation, the white men did not die in the

evil forest. This is the most serious moment towards the ecological damage by the missionaries, but it is not only the cultural damage. When the trees were cleared, the habitation of many wild animals, birds, and others were also lost as a result of this activity.

Similarly, when their church was constructed, they started to invite the native people for their prayers and started preaching that the true god is their god but not the villagers as the narration unfolds in the book: 'Their church stood on a circular clearing that looked like the open mouth of the Evil Forest' (142). Here, the forest is cleared up and the buildings were erected instead, which is a worse example of the natural environment. In the novel too, the white colonizers went to many villages and converted the native people and environment into their own needs and wish. The novel narrates the situation: 'He went back to the church and told Mr. Kiaga that he had decided to go to Umuofia,

where the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write' (144). Here, the novelist means that the white men converted the young people's minds into their mindset and requirement. Killing wild animals was like a sin in the native Nigerian villages as they take snakes, birds, and other animals as part of their god. For the wild animal python, they call 'Our Father'. Killing a python was considered as a great sin and mistake. They have the culture to let go of the python everywhere it wishes which means that they have a very eco-friendly culture: 'If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god' (150). There is a close connection between nature, animals, humans, and god according to their culture and religion. But the white missionaries killed the python which is an environmental sin and against the eco-system as well. It is said in the novel that 'they say that Okoli killed the sacred pytho' (152). Such killing of

wild animals is against their rule, culture, and tradition which started to happen in Umuofia after the arrival of the white man.

Before the white man's arrival, people were engaged in their farmland producing yam, coco, kola nuts, and other crops. The people were living in the true wilderness and naturalness in their farmland. But after the arrival of the white man, they started to be engaged with so many other things like the church, the new religion, war, conflicts, and many more. The people were the prayers of nature. They pray the rain, sun, rainbow, and the breeze blow as their god and goddess. They considered the rainbow in the sky as the python of the sky. As the days and years pass, the rain becomes lighter and lighter. Praying the nature Achebe writes that 'the rain became lighter and lighter until it fell in slanting showers. Sometimes the sun shone through the rain and a light breeze blew. The rainbow began to appear. The rainbow was called the python of the sky' (154). The lines

show the integrity of humans and animals, showing the people pray for natural beauty.

Nigerian people, the representative society of the novel, consider nature and the earth as goddesses who provide people with everything. They pray and worship the mother goddess regularly and believe that they get blessings from her. Achebe asks a question: 'Surely the earth goddess would not visit the sins of the missionaries on the innocent villagers?' (146). This line indicates that the missionaries are criminals like people who do sins over the innocent villagers. Before the arrival of the white people, the earth goddess was blessing the villagers but the situation was different after their arrival. The white man came with many more problems and hegemony over the natives. They came with their ruling system, government, policies, punishments, and many more. They came as the colonizers over the natives. Achebe's line justifies this argument: 'But stories were already gaining

ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government' (146). Here, the use of the word 'government' clarifies that the white men were the colonizers of the native Igbo community or the country.

It is the nature of the colonizers that they attack the economy, culture, religion, history, and government system of the native land. The Igbo society was the integrated form before the white men's arrival. Okonkwo had the supremacy of power in the cultural and ruling matter at the beginning of the novel, but this unity and integrity is scattered towards the end of the novel. In this way, there is the tragic fall of a heroic character like Okonkwo. The white men came and destroyed the human and non-human world in the Igbo community as the novel clearly justifies. In the destruction process, the white men adopted the policy of 'divide and rule' to the natives themselves. Achebe writes, 'We do not pray to have more money but to have

more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him' (156). This very nature of the Igbo people is almost lost at the end of the novel due to the arrival and hegemony over the natives.

### **Conclusion**

The environment study for the conservation of natural environment is one of the prominent trends in literary writing these days. The present world is facing many environment-related problems like garbage management, deforestation, global warming, weather extremes, and many more. Political reasons like imperialism, colonialism, and war are the major factors for environmental degradation which is projected in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, the activity of the white people gradually destroyed the natural and cultural integrity and intimacy of the natives. They preached that their so-called native god, *Ani*, is no more important,

but god Jesus is only the supreme god in the world. The colonizers detached mother earth far away and established Christ god in the mind of the natives. The destruction of natural and environmental aspects of the native Igbo culture has been destroyed with the arrival of Whites in the country. The Whites' colony was out of control. As a result, the centre could not hold but things fell apart in Nigeria as projected in Achebe's novel.

Thus the importance of Postcolonial Ecocriticism is felt necessary to apply to this African novel as —Postcolonial studies have come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend. (Huggan et al. Postcolonial Ecocriticism. 6) It was not only during the colonial period, but even after the end of colonial rule, developmental projects

master-planned in Western countries have been continuously robbing nature of its riches and degrading the environment.

This paper is concluded with the note that Postcolonial Ecocriticism can play a crucial part in the study of present environmental degradation. This critical school can throw new insight into the western ideas of development which, under the disguise of neocolonialism, has been a cause of global environmental crises. A balanced view of development is the need of the hour and postcolonial ecocriticism can contribute to global justice and sustainability by exploring themes centered on nature and environment across different literary works.

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