

Changing Dynamics in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

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ABSTRACT

There is an ecological crisis in the contemporary world. In order to trace the beginning of the ecological disaster, this paper goes back to early 20th century. This paper analyses Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* through eco-critical lens. It is an attempt to study the Igbo religion which was a nature loving and nature dependent religion. With the advent of missionaries in the village of Umuofia, there is complete disruption of the Igbo social culture and religion. British were successful in setting their colonies in the Igbo land in the guise of trade and religion. Christian rulers tell them that man is at the center and nature is at periphery. Ignorant Igbos started losing their faith in their religion and natural deities which marks the beginning of disintegration of Igbo religion and ecological degradation.

Achebe published his first novel *Things fall Apart* in 1958, which depicts the Nigerian situation in pre-colonial era. i.e. in the last quarter of the 19th century. His novel projects a composite picture of tradition in Igbo life and also a kind of celebration of the glorious past of the Igbo society. The value of African literature lies in its African-ness retained in spite of its cosmopolitan origin. The effect of the wisdom, ethical tradition and pride of Africa's ancient societies is so deep and pervasive that one comes across the varied facets of the mystery of Africa in the writings of several African writers time and again in spite of the tormenting experiences of the colonial ordeal. S.A. Khayoom has rightly commented in his essay titled 'The Neo-Anthropological Novels':

Achebe's novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in particular are a study of Igbo tradition and are historical in perspective...it is argued that the real tradition of Nigerian literature in English started with the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* as a typical Igbo novel to articulate social changes through cultural conflict and tensions. When the early Nigerian prose fiction was dominated by Amos Tutuola's fantastic folklore romances and Cyprian Ekwensi's stories of city life, Achebe introduced psychological crisis into Nigerian literature. Achebe delved deep into African tradition to write about Igbo life and culture from within as an Igbo. (*Chinua Achebe – A study of his novels*, 125)

Many of modern novelists, poets and playwrights either eulogize their glorious past or speak of the devastation inflicted on the native societies by the colonial powers of Europe in terms of protest, conflict, anguish, anger or phobia. They make a fruitful use of the European literary forms on order to voice their strongly felt emotional turmoil, the offshoot of their encounter with the alien rulers. Achebe possesses an effortlessness of story-telling and employs a curiously molded tone which is at once formal and fiercely passionate. He enjoys the advantage of commanding the right background producing masterpieces. He has witnessed the three major phases that Africa passed through – that is its vanishing glory with the advent of Western civilization, the harrowing period of colonial

rule, the enthusiastic pre-independence times and the post-colonial era of disillusionment.

Achebe wrote this novel in English language and defended its use by insisting that the African novelist has an obligation to educate, and has attacked European critics who failed to understand African literature on its own terms. His aim behind writing this novel was to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. This novel is considered as seminal African novel in English. Most striking feature of this novel is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a traditional village culture in Africa. It is an effort to aware and remind both the outside world and the Igbo people of the Igbo cultural traditions and to assert that it had contained much of value. Many people at the time of publication of novel used to accept the European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering. S.A. khayoom tried to break this stereotype in his essay, 'The Neo-Anthropological Novels'. He says:

The voice of Africa in the world of letters tries to emancipate Africa from its literary stereotype. To the insider and outsiders, Africa is no longer a gloomy phenomenon, a dark continent and a fantasy world. The novels of Chinua Achebe, the major exponent of the modern African novel, are a new way of looking at tradition to create a different order of reality through imagination. Achebe has subordinated the anthropology of his novels to the human condition. He is greatly concerned with the two realities of social man- his individuality and group identity, the legacy of colonialism, and the English language as the medium of expression of African experiences and inspiration defining the relevance of colonial experience to the present. (*Chinua Achebe – A study of his novels*, 124)

This novel was set in the 1890's and portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. The protagonist of the novel is trying to maintain the cultural integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule. The title for this novel comes from the poem, *The*

Second Coming by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). The relevant lines quoted by Achebe in the title page of the novel are:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things Fall Apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Yeats's poem is heavily symbolic and is a perfect metaphor for the breakdown of the "old" order and its displacement by a "new" order that kicks up mixed feelings of revulsion and fascination as the novel itself is about a forcible break-up of an "older" and settled order.

This paper is an attempt to analyze this novel through eco-critical lens. Achebe did not write this novel with an eco-consciousness i.e. awareness about degradation of nature and its conservation but a detailed reading of this novel through the eco-critical lens claims it to be an eco-critical text. William Slaymaker in his essay 'Ecoing the other(s): The call of Global Green and Black African Responses' says:

Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues, and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and cultural claims and that also function as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environment evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. (*Anthology of African Literature*, 683)

William Slaymaker also talks about the reluctance of African writers to accept the theory of Ecocriticism, as they consider it to be a Western concept. "It appears as one more hegemonic discourse from the metropolitan West" (*Anthology of African Literature*, 684). He called it 'eco-hesitation' to respond weakly to the green wave resounding through much of the literary world.

Europeans brought with them the concept of exploitation of nature and natural resources to the indigenous land of Africa for the benefit of mankind. This was a new concept for the Africans and initially unacceptable to them. So, it was this western influence which is responsible for exploitation and abuse of the environment in its colonies. European colonialism is the major phenomenon happened in the African land which has sown the seeds of exploitation of nature when it is in its most inviolate state.

Things Fall Apart do not seem to fall under the category of eco-critical text in its first reading and Achebe too did not write it with the same eco-awareness in his mind. But a deeper study of the novel and the Igbo people along with the eco-critical text makes it one. In the reading of the novel we could find the spiritual relationship between the Igbo people and the nature. Igbo people consider nature to be supreme and sacred and they used to guard and preserve nature in a commendable way before the European influence. Firstly, we will discuss the background of the novel along with the theory. It also discusses about pre-colonial Igbo life and their interaction and

dependence on nature. Secondly, we will discuss about the intervention of Christian missionaries and environmental degradation by applying the eco-critical theory.

We can see in the novel which is set in the Umuofia village that how social customs and values of Igbo people had been falling apart as a result of developments within the society itself. Nature has a very important role to play in the novel and its degradation is the disintegration of society itself. Achebe described the Umuofian forests as something untouched and undisturbed, "The footway had now become a narrow line in the heart of the forest. The short trees and sparse undergrowth which surrounded the men's village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the axe and the bush-fire. The sun breaking through their leaves and branches threw a pattern of light and shade on the sandy foot-way". (43). Achebe very beautifully personified the non-human nature in the novel:

At the last the rain came. It was sudden and tremendous. For two or three moons the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to breathe a breath of fire on the earth. All the grass had long been scorched brown, and the sand felt like live coals to the feet. Evergreen trees wore a dusty coat of brown. The birds were silenced in the forests, and the world lay panting under the live, vibrating heat. And then came the clap of thunder. It was an angry, metallic and thirsty clap, unlike the deep and liquid rumbling of the rainy season. A mighty wind arose and fulfilled the air with dust. Palm trees swayed as the wind combed their leaves into flying crests like strange and fantastic coiffure... The earth quickly came to life and the birds in the forests fluttered around and chirped merrily. A vague scent of life and green vegetation was diffused in the air. (96)

Such description evidently shows the high regards in which Africans and Igbo people in particular keep the mother nature. So, it is out of question for them to exploit or abuse it for their selfish means. The dynamics of man and nature change and Africans turn out to be exploiters from worshippers of it. S.A. Khayooms says in his article 'Method and Technique':

Achebe in his novels describes the symbolic order of African society from a culturalist point of view. Physical confrontation, economic crisis, and political violence constitute the setting of the novel even when Christianity and the colonial administration triumph over the ancient order in Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe has further shown that the disintegration of Igbo society is not due to the Whiteman's presence which has merely acted as a catalyst but mainly due to the antagonistic forces within the clan. (*Chinua Achebe – A study of his novels*, 79)

Their religion has many gods and spirits related to nature. They celebrate many ceremonies as tribute to and dedication to their gods. As mentioned in the novel, they have a goddess of earth and fertility named Ani (Odinani). Ani rules the underworld and keeps the dead ancestors in her womb. She is

also the god of morality for she judges Igbo people's actions and law. Any wrong doing on the part of humans is considered as sin against goddess. For example, it is forbidden in their society to do any kind of violence one week before the plantation of yams. It is called as the 'week of peace'. Okonkwo the protagonist of the novel, "is now, at thirty-eight, a titled man, and a living legend in the clan of nine villages of which Umuofia, a village in the hinterlands of Igbo nation, is a stellar member. Okonkwo has three wives, eight children, and two barns. He is a renowned warrior, he has five human heads hanging on the walls of his hut to attest to his bravery. Even by the high standards of Umuofia and clan. Okonkwo is truly an unusual man" (Introduction, xii). He broke the peace-code during the 'week of peace' by beating his youngest wife over a petty issue. As he committed the sin against goddess Ani, he is made to pay heavy penalty of one she-goat, one hen, cloth and hundred cowries to compensate the harm. He was reminded by one of neighbours:

You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well 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 harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessings our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil...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. (23)

It was a rare thing in their society to break the rules. "It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. Even the oldest men could only remember one or two other occasions somewhere in the dim past" (24). As discussed earlier, Igbos were very concerned about mother nature and act and set various time tables accordingly. They do not do any work on land during 'week of peace' so as to give rest to the earth so that it gets rejuvenated and regains its fertility for the upcoming planting season. They also observe New Yam festival to give thanks to goddess Ani. They hold the belief to not to upset the goddess of harvest because she might make the crops wither on the stalk. Ani is the most important goddess of Igbo people. They place their highest faith in gods and spirits. They consider mother earth's reaction for their every act as Obrieka told Okonkwo that he has not done good by killing a boy named Ikemfuna, who was like his son. He says, "What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (49), even if it is the decision of the oracle.

Nature has such a deep influence in their lives so that we can see the impressions of nature in their language too. They have a rich oral literature embedded with number of proverbs and sayings. "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (6). The proverbs which they used in their language constitute many non-human elements which show their dependency and influence on them. To quote some examples from the novel like there are some proverbs in the "When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a

walk" (8), "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (16), "A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches" (48), "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother put into the palm" (49), "When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth" (51), "I can not live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle" (121), and "The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another" (125).

After discussing the pre-colonial Igbo society with nature in its inviolate state, this paper will further highlight the degradation of non-human nature with the colonial intervention in the next part of the novel which follows Okonkwo's expulsion from Umuofia. The ecological imbalance has started taking place it was that year when,

Okonkwo took eight hundred seed-yams from Nwakibia was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too 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... But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed. (18)

People of Umuofia were really surprised by the violent rain that year. The rain "fell as it had never fallen before" (18). It uprooted many trees and made deep gorges everywhere. It washed away all the yam heaps. It rained for many days without any pause. It was bad year for harvesting, "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). They consider year to be a year of test of the adversity and they were proud to survive that year.

Igbos had very strict laws regarding nature. Nature could not be taken for granted by any member of the society and no one is allowed to use it in his or her own terms. The men of title are forbidden to climb the tree and are allowed to tap the short ones standing on the ground. Okonkwo was also a man of title of the Umuofia village and hence could not climb the palm tree. He repents this thing, "Sometimes I wish I had not taken the ozo title. It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping" (50). He fears the unfriendly and uncordial behaviour of the younger generation towards the non-human nature. He also discusses with his fellow persons about the breaking of such age-old customs in the nearby villages of Abame and Aninta, "where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives" (53). Disintegration of nature has deep impact on the nature in a gradual way. Okonkwo was really worried over it and says, "All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market" (53). He could sense it quite well before the time that such disintegration of customs and values may lead to the insensitiveness of the people towards the mother nature.

Commenting on the medieval view of man and nature, Lynn White in his essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, says that "The new Frankish calendars, which set the style for the Middle Ages, are very different: that they show men coercing the world around them- plowing, harvesting, chopping trees, butchering pigs. Man and nature are two things, and man is master" (1205). This is how there is shift of belief and man's relation has started changing gradually. Along with the merits of his religion he started talking about demerits of the religion of Igbo. It was the first time when the Igbo heard something ill about their religion. He straightaway defied their religion and their natural gods. The interpreter said,

The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone...Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like a Palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true god lived forever in his happy Kingdom. (106)

People of Mbanata listened to his speech with utter disbelief and shock. Their ears could not believe what they heard about their religion and the sacred Gods. They could not even dare to think so ill about their Gods. White told them that he has been sent by the great God to help them to get rid of their wicked Gods who are very rigid and unfriendly to them. White man also promised to bring more iron-horses (bicycles) on his next visit and those who are ready to convert to this new and easy religion would have the privilege to ride them too. They were quite amazed to know the fact that white man is going to live with them in their land. It was when an old man of the village asks a question that the new religion belongs to which God, Earth Goddess, Sky God or God of thunderbolt and the White man answered very coldly, "All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who will tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has made the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us" (107). People of Mbanta were really worried over the thought of neglecting their gods. They were expecting a wrath or punishment in some form even for listening so disgraceful words for their gods. White tried to pacify their fear by saying that, "Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm...They are pieces of wood and stone" (107). It was the very beginning of colonial intervention in the African land and shows how they started shaking their firm beliefs and roots slowly.

Mr Brown, the white missionary, was a clever man and he dealt with Umuofian clan very cleverly. He tried to make them defy their gods in a very patient manner. He told the villagers that their supreme god, "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood- like that one...and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood" (130). He dealt in a very ambiguous manner so that villagers may not get offended and keep him in high regards always. He tells them Chukwu is very powerful and does not need the smaller gods like god of sky, water, thunderstorm, earth etc for his help. They should neglect the smaller gods and should treat them as part of

nature only. Nature is made to serve human beings and human are at the centre of it. They should use the things available in nature as much as they want to and the way they want to use it. He adds further that, "the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created" (131). He compares the little gods to the servants and whom one approaches first so as to reach the master. He also told them their God Chukwu is a dominating one whom they all fear unlike their Christian Chukwu who is a loving God and people don't feel fearful at all. They love their God and in turn loved and cared by their God. In this way whites were able to disintegrate the united and powerful Igbo society by shaking its roots slowly. There was no feeling of kinship among them. They were no longer united by the religion. There were no more distinguished personalities and the earlier men of title hold no respect and regards in the eyes of others. There was no oracle. There was no community and everybody wants easy life. The Christianity was giving them all. They no more feel fearful or guilty for abusing or doing any harm to the nature. There was a prevailing sense of individuality among them. To make the situation worse, Mr Brown was replaced by Reverend Smith. He was not a diplomat like the previous one. He condemned their culture and things openly. People who are with bad intentions got full vent of their feelings. They start taking pride in abusing the nature. People like Enoch who was son of a priest of snake cult, has killed a sacred python and eaten him. His , "devotion to the new faith had seemed so much greater than Mr Brown's that the villagers called him The Outsider who wept louder than the bereaved" (135). Enoch was full of new energy of the religion and was most of the times a reason for conflict between church and people of clan.

He lamented how their own brothers are also responsible for all this. They have deserted them and joined the new faith. It is pathetic to see that now they have to fight with their brothers in order to get rid of the new religion. It was a high time for them to do which was not thought of earlier. He told them to, "bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep. . ." (148). They thought the situation was still under control and they could retaliate it unitedly. Okonkwo was getting more and more angry and a court messenger along with four other fellows happen to pass through that meeting with high headedness. Okonkwo couldn't control anymore and killed him with his matchet there and then only. "In a flash Okonkwo drew his matchet...Okonkwo's matchet decended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body (149). This was something which was a biggest ever thing done on both sides of the people. People of Umuofia were afraid of the consequences and became more fearful after the incident. The commissioner along with his fellow men visited the village and asked for Oknkwo. He threatened the villagers of dire consequences. Obierika led them to the back compound of the Oknkwo's house where they found his body hanged to a tree. They were surprised to see him dead. Obierika couldn't believe his eyes. He says,

It is abomiantion for a man to take his life own life. It is an offence agaisnt the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask

your people to bring him down, because you are strangers. (151)

Commissioner was happy to see him like this and felt a sense of victory in his death. He gave his willingness to send for his men to bring his body down. He mocks the plight of Okonkwo, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (151). The only recognition great Okonkwo could find after his death was a reasonable paragraph in a book named *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. He lost his life for he could never surrender his life to the whites and can't be a slave in his own land. Though we can witness in the novel that he ended his life by himself going against their customs. S.A. Khayoom commented on the sad plight of Okonkwo in his essay Achebe's Fictional Art says:

There is a sense of failure in the novels of Achebe. The novels, narrating the story of the protagonists and their misfortune, also demonstrate the collapse of the traditional society. The central characters have certain flaws in their character which are suggestive of some sort of moral failure and which lead them to their eventuality. Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*) gives himself to excessive rage, is overbearing, inordinately ambitious to become one of the lords of Umuofia, but has failed to get into an accommodation with the alien culture. (*Chinua Achebe- A Study of His Novels*, 60)

Conclusion: In the end this paper concludes that there is beginning of the change of the relationship of man and nature. Man who once kept nature at the supreme position has started shifting his faith and the seeds of exploitation of nature have been sown.

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