

## **Ecocritical Analysis of Myth in Achebe's Things Fall Apart**

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**Abstract:** *This research is a continuation on the works that have been done on Achebe's Things Fall Apart as it considers the myth that are inherent there in it from an ecocritical perspective. It hopes to establish that African literary writings are rich in ecological issues and attempts to use the myths that are in Things Fall Apart to explain the relationship between nature and human culture. Ecocriticism is the theoretical approach on which this work is anchored on because it is study that moves nature from just a mere framing device and to the center as far as literary criticism is concerned. The myths that are in Things Fall Apart includes the story of the quarrel between the sky and the earth, the locust visitation every seven years etc. the significance of these myths among other things is to establish the harmony that previously exist between man and nurture; which is a furtherance of the issue that shows men indebtedness to natural praxis. Finally, this research has established the importance of nature in some of the myths in Things Fall Apart and suggested that more works should be done within the African literary culture to show how nature has been discussed or used in various literary works.*

**Keywords:** *Myth, Ecocriticism, Things Fall Apart.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Modern African literature represents one of the medium through which African writers discuss issues within their socio-cultural environment. Many writers have suggested that African literary writers often position their works to the service of the environmental space thereby making them easily susceptible to ecocritical analyses. Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) stands out in the realm of literary writings that questions European perception of Africans and their environment and remains a pathfinder and reference point of discourse in defining the direction of African literature. The study therefore hopes to contribute to the various writings that have been down on the epochal Things Fall Apart(1958) by investigating the ecocritical undertones that are in the myths that are projected in the novel.

### **Conceptual Overview of Ecocriticism**

Ecocritical writings have come along way. It is only in the 1970s that it began to be given ecocritical label and canons. A reading of Michelle Boissou's Parchment represents one of the earliest works from the Medieval that chooses the unbuilt or rustic environment as a focus in the poem. Parchment is a prayer book but goes beyond it, for it is a beauty created through technology with all its artistic sensibilities. As one looks beyond the content of the work is the materiality of creation in itself, which include the slaughtered calf, the fallen oak trees, the insect engendered gall, from which is supplied the dark ink for writing. The poem captures the rapacious use of the environment to man's benefit without taking care or consideration of the raw material used for the production. Though the work might have been written in the Medieval and the succeeding generations might not have hearken to the message that Boussou has orchestrated, but Parchment according to words of Rigby (2007:153)Reminds us that the price of production in borne by subordinate humans as well as by non-human others. This links between social domination and exploitation of nature is hinted at again in the close of the poem, where we learn the purpose for which this book had been produced at such cost: namely for the private use of the king. The exploitation of the environment from the above lines are more pronounced with the aristocratic class as one can see that with all the destructions that have to take place to produce the parchment, it is only meant for the private use of the king. This calls that the destruction is un-needed in the first place but just to massage the aristocratic ego. Ecocriticism therefore looks at some of the issues raised by the Parchment and finds a way of advocating for the environment.

William Reckert (1978) work titled Literature and Ecology : Experimentation in Ecocriticism represents one of the earliest interests in the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. It was in the work that the first idea of ecocriticism as a nomenclature was muted. Buell ( 1995:420) defines ecocriticism as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis. Buell seeks for a commitment that will ensure that natural praxis will be given premium when discussing literary works. No wonder Coupe (2000) sees ecocriticism as a debate on nature in order to defend nature. This is so because in literature human factor has always been occupying the

centre-piece and the environment where all the action takes place is often pushed to the background. Ecocriticism tends to pursue eco-justice, according to Slovice (1999:102); it is justice that will ensure that the human and non-human elements are treated equally. Glotfelty (1996) analyses the focus of ecocriticism because it should not be confused with romanticism or vegetarianism. Romanticism is a literary or artistic movement of 18<sup>th</sup> century chiefly characterized by a reaction against Neo-classicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions; and marked especially in English literature by sensibility and use of autobiographical material; an appreciation of eternal nature; and an interest in the remote while vegetarianism is a theory or practice of living on a vegetarian diet. It is the practice of the consuming diet or advocating for a flesh of animals and is mostly composed of plant parts such as leaves, fresh fruits, nut and seeds. Glotfelty (1996) further said that ecocriticism analyses the relationship between nature and culture by focusing on people's involvement in those relationships. Secondly, it analyses the relationship between human and non-human entities (such as dogs, cows, elephants, rivers, mountain, earth etc)

The two points as stated above among others have been the focus of ecocriticism, the field can still be said to be new but there are fringes of developments within its praxis that are inexhaustible if one has to begin to discuss them.

### **Nature/Culture and the Eco-critics**

The explanation of the place of culture in environment has raised a lot of comments. For the ecocritic, the study of nature in relation with human culture is very important particularly in a text. Hagen (2012:1) says that in the explication of the cultural environment,

the ecocritics should focus on the examinations of the extent of environmental exploitation of human and non human habitats, the resulting senses of displacement, homelessness and double consciousness and how these motifs are expressed or disguised in a text.

In other words, the focus of anyone that want to look at the environment should beam its torchlight on the natural environmental destruction and how it impacts on human and non-human lives; how it displaced them from the environment or home and how this sense of displacement affects their general consciousness. Ecocriticism studies and believes that there is a synergy between nature and culture and dispels the anthropological notion that suggests that 'no work of culture that is not exploitative of nature. Conversely, it believes that it is only through culture that human seems to understand nature. Rigby (2005:155) position explains the relationships that exist between nature and culture. To him, Culture constructs the prism through which we know nature . We begin to construct the prism through which we know nature when we we begin to internalize the prism from the moment we learn to speak; the moment, that is, that we are inducted into the logos; the world; as shaped by language. Rigby's explanation of culture and nature helps us to understand our natural environment. The natural environment includes the flora, fauna, and the landscape but that does not include the human aspects of our ecology. Biblically, the first chapter of Genesis justifies that the natural environment came into being before humans and their culture, no wonder Rigby said that ecocriticism: (render) an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature and specifically revalue the more than human natural world; to which some texts and cultural tradition seem to suggest From the above, nature came before human culture and the former preceding the latter has not negatively impacted on the relationship that exist between them. There are texts that tend to suggest this: a reading of Markandaya's Nectar in the Sieve(1954) describes a farm which evokes ideas of an un-spoiled, fecund, provincial landscape that is at peace with, and always nostalgic for its even more harmonious past and Markandaya relating it to the prevailing land grabbing machination by owners of the tannery. To the effect that, the non-human aspect of the environment is systematically rapped of its virtues through exploitative means.

Murphy (2000:68) also captures the situation that the non-human and human have to suffer succinctly in Nectar in the Sieve: "that the environment (to them) cannot be treated without attention to violence, welfare, government, corruption and transnational cooperate greed". As there is continual negative application of western science and technology on the processes of nature marked by devastating experience of dispossession or loss to the people of India. It is this abnormally that ecocritics attempt to expose as it considers the interaction between culture and nature. It is duty of the ecocritic to refract Comrad' Heart of Darkness (1995) and gave a more positive presentation of the African environment rather than that which is envisioned like a woman that need to be tamed. Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) has been described as an answer to the aforementioned work of Comrad because it redefines the African continent from being a place of death and as a woman that needs taming. The interplay of culture and nature becomes the focal point on which Achebe situates his work under discussion. Nwangi (2004) justifies the cultural and natural relationship that is carefully expressed in Things Fall Apart through language as thus:

Achebe's Things Fall Apart chooses its setting in the forests of Umuofia with its complex system of education, a rich philosophy and sophisticated art and the complex religion and medicine practice

Nwangi (2004) describes the harmony that only explains a forest environment that accommodates the education, the philosophy and religion of a people. Similar invocation of the environmental praxis can be located in Ngugi's *River Between*. The opening lines of the narrative presents a meticulous observation of the topography as he painstakingly described Makuyu and Kamao ridges and valleys. Scheese (2002) said that this done without oblivious of the importance of the socio-relationship of the humans; in that, the environment becomes as important as human-character. Scheese (2000) further states that ecocritics is mostly appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, and place and character. To the ecocritics therefore, the natural environment include the landscape; the landscape has the non-human elements which include the place, rocks, soil, trees, plant, rivers, animals, air as well as human perceptions and modification. From Scheese's judgment it becomes uneasy to describe nature without including the human and non-human world.

Yacoubou (2011) throws more light into the relationship between culture and nature by capturing what should be within the purview of ecocriticism:

- 1) Ecocriticism counters anthropocentric notions that place humans at the centre of the universe.
- 2) It dispels the idea of the countryside living found in most romantic literature or environmental literature that depicts farm animals grazing outside on sunny days but sue for situations that will encourage apartment dwellers to install roof top vegetable gardens, rain water tanks and compost tumblers in their environment as a way of promoting eco-friendly environment.
- 3) Ecocriticism condemns environmental racism i.e the dumping of toxics next to the poor often in the ambience of the African American or Hispanic or African communities that poses serious health implication to those that are around toxic sites.
- 4) Ecocriticism moves beyond wilderness to focus on metropolitan areas because most humans live in urban areas.
- 5) Ecocriticism explores the sense of place (i.e the setting in literature) and argues that people develop with their physical environment.
- 6) It takes a biocentric world view as it relates to the analysis of nature to include the extension of ethic, broadening of human's community to include non human life forms and the physical environment so as to envision ecological sustainable society (Branch,1998)

The above features conveniently argued that the focus of the ecocritic is not a romantic expression that advocates for an escape into the rustic space but that which challenge environmental racism, destruction of the green environment and senseless killings of animals and they impact on the environment as well as the human species. It therefore expresses the term wilderness to incorporate the metropolitan areas. It is also of note that the cultural and the natural environments intertwined and they cannot be separated as far as the ecocritics are concerned. The culture of a people includes the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the myth, legends, tales folk tales, lores, music, dance etc. myth and the environment has some things in common one, both are set in the premodial times. It is presented as incidents or events that happened in those days. Just like the environment it is difficult to situate myth in a particular period hence there is no date for the origin of myth. Myths can be said to be old as man because they help us to explain the process, ways and wherefore of certain natural events which are usually viewed or sounding mysterious. Myth reflects the origin of societal set up. The stories about the origin of community are often regarded as myth, because they appeal to the imagination fancies of the people. Akporobero (2006: 48) defines myth as kind of story or rudimentary narratives sequences normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. African myths is an integral part of human culture and they are viably connected to the environment

Myth as part of human culture and they are in the distant past. The distant past makes them to be easily connected because the environment precedes man.

### **Myth in Things Fall Apart**

Myth is part of the culture of most African nations. A myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant past history of a people. Alagoa (1979:9) says myth it as historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community. Jaja (2012) sees myth as man-made stories that play explanatory functions in the African understanding of society. That is, myth helps us to comprehend the society that we live in; the story (ies) is told as they shape our existence. As human civilization moves on, new myths are being created to explain the present; no wonder Anyanwu (2000) opines that man is a myth-making animal.

Myths in Africa are found to be mysterious and illogical and they are so because they are part of the way of life of a people (Jaja, 2000). Some of the myths that would be discussed in *Things Fall Apart* may sound out of the world but they remain part of what shapes the people's existence. Myth teaches man by regulating the way of his living in a devotional engagement with the whole of man's existence. Abamuka (1994:45) says that:

Myth tells of the super-human experiences of the community, myth exposes the fact that man's misfortunes on earth as well as his hardships are attributed to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as appoint in his life.

Some of the moral codes of the deities found expressions in animals and plants which make some fables that are conveyed in African cosmogony to be termed mythical. No wonder, Jaja (2012) said that "myth is not an intellectual explanation of an artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. In Myth, one would find stories of origin, explanatory stories and didactic stories.

In *Things Fall Apart* the following myth would be discussed ecocritically, the mosquito myth, locust myth, the Osu myth and the myth of the earth and sky. The mosquito myth is discussed as thus:

Mosquitoes... had ask Ear to marry him Whereupon Ear fell in the floor laughing in uncontrollable laughter. 'How much longer would you live, you are already a skeleton'. Mosquitoes went away humiliated and anytime he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive. (p. 22)

The Ear, a synecdoche for a human being is portrayed as being alive and mosquitoes as a non-human life of our natural habitat have a sort of relationship with the former and when the mosquitoes asked for the hands of the Ear in marriage, the former declined. Since then, the later has always told the former anytime it passes that he is alive. This only explains that there used to be a relationship between the non-human and human within the African cosmology and there is no barrier between the two of them. One can argue that the mosquitoes that now spread malaria do so as a revenge on man because ear refused his proposal. Man has to create all manner of defense mechanism to prevent mosquitoes announcing that he is living through the use of insecticide, mosquitos' nets and all other shields. As funny as the story may appear, it only reinforces that there was a harmony between the non human life and the humans. Conceivably, if the Ear has acceded to the request of the mosquitoes, the enmities that exist between man and mosquitoes would not have arise. The mosquitoes reminding the Ear can further means that the mosquitoes is a metaphor for anti-colonial struggle while the Ear stands for the force of imperialism. The struggle against colonialism by Africans (from the European eye): may not live long or it may die a natural death. But the struggle for self government continues as it is revealed by the constant reminder being orchestrated by the mosquitoes; until, the eventual liberation of sub-Saharan Africa from the shackles of oppression

The locust myth is told in the third year of Ikemefuna's arrival into Okonkwo's household and in the eve of his tragic death, a locust swarm descends on the Umuofians. The story narrates thus;

The elders said the locust came once in a generation reappeared every year for seven years and appeared for another lifetime in a distant land, where they are guarded by a race of stunted men. And when after another lifetime these men opened the caves again and the locusts came to Umuofia.

According to the myth, the locust may appear for a generation but when it appears it may come for the next seven years. Locust stands for celebration and joy and their coming is ushered in with gladness and fun-fare. The locust being a non human organism and constitutes an integral part of the environment and is a harbinger of joy, harmony and talk in the Umuofia society. Reasons their presence elicits such celebration is because their presence is one in a life time celebration and for the Umuofians they are appetizing meal. Although, the locust has a phenomenal record of wide destruction but with the Umuofian they usher in dances and celebrations and a desired precious meal to be eaten. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo was later described sitting with his son, Nwoye and Ikemefuna, crunching them happily and drinking palm wine copiously. Enjoying what nature has to offer at that time of the season. The locust therefore becomes nature gifts to mankind. The arrival of the locust contrasts the arrival of the Europeans. Soon after the invasion of the locust is the coming of the European with Christianity that later led to the conversion of many into their faith. Natural events therefore bear significance in understanding the events in human history, revealing that the European has come to disrupt the harmony with environment.

The Osu myth has an age long place among the Igbos Wren(1981:28) said Osu is a person dedicated to a god. The person naturally becomes a taboo forever and his children after him. The Osus are also revealed in *Things Fall Apart* as one of the early converts that came to the church (*Things Fall*, p.111) Basden (1966:296) said that their origin may be unknown but they are regarded as one of the historical tradition of the igbos in Nigeria. They lived in the forest in *Things Fall Apart* and these forests are sacred and often dedicated to the gods. Forests to them are not a place of death but that which preserves and nurtures them to fulfill the purpose why they exist. Osu stands for that is united with the forest. The 'Osus' ended up among the 1<sup>st</sup> that benefited from western education (*Things Fall*, p.33). The rustic environment can therefore be said to be a place that nurtures for eventual educational achievement.

The myth that explains the quarrel between the Earth and the sky was said by Nwoye's Mother. Achebe describes Nwoye as a young boy that is always in love with the story that the mother always told him. But his father, Okonkwo sees a weakness in his son Nwoye because of his love for his mother and a quiet semblance for what his father stood for which he hated. One of such motherly story was told by the mother as thus:

He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky ago, and how sky withheld rain for seven years. Until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because of hoes broke on the strong Earth. At least vulture was sent to plead with sky and, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of man. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang his song he (Nwoye) felt carried away to the distant land in the sky... where earth emissary song for mercy. At last, the sky was moved with pity, and he gave vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on vulture that he did not perform to deliver the message but flew to a distant land from where he has espied a fire. And when he got there he found it has a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails (Things fall, 38)

The above myth has huge significance to ecocritical feelings. Zolfagharkani and Shadpour (2013; 210) say that through such narratives "children learned about their original culture and the close relationship between nature and humans these stories thought humanity and morality with variant symbols in nature and proved that respecting nature is the corollary of these factors'. The story above also shows that nature in African environment communicates and if there is any culture that disagree it is their inability to listen to them. The vulture is a messenger. No wonder he is the emissary sent to mediate between earth and sky on behalf of man that cannot farm any longer because the earth is hard to plough due to lack of rain. The vulture is addressed as 'he' meaning that he is giving a masculine attributes to show its importance. The vulture though failed in the mission. In failure, well beaten by the rain, it finds its direction to the location of man making sacrificing with fire; a fire that the vulture seriously needed because of the draining rain and the man never pursue the vulture, all these but show that the non-human life of the natural habitat and man has a close relationship. The essence of the fire is warmness. It provides warmness for the vulture and man in the midst of cold thereby revealing the bond between human and the fauna.

## II. Conclusion

The myths in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) are such that show that Africans have a culture that recognizes the place of the natural environments including the flora and fauna and they are part of the daily life of the African man. Both live in harmony and tend to communicate to each other. The need to refer to place of this harmony is a call to remembrance of what African environment used to be before the colonial invasions which at the same time form a link with the central idea on why the novel was written. Achebe has said the reason why *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was written is because there is a need to respond to Comrad's *Heart of Darkness* distortion of African environment and its people. Zolfagharkani and Shadpour (2013; 213) responding to this had said that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) expresses the true African culture by disseminating morality and humanity through its connection with nature. Consequently, the colonizers attempted to wipe out this culture in order to enslave Africans but they resisted the colonizers by protecting their original culture. *Things fall Apart* is only a microscopic observation of what is happening elsewhere in Africa that the myth of the people has a strong bond with the on-built environment. Myth has we have seen derived its strength from nature. Achebe has successfully revealed this through this work; no wonder the *Things Fall Apart* remains a master piece as far as African literature is concerned.

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