

An Eco-critical Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Nature in original African culture has a supreme power which forbids human beings from immorality or unjust treatment toward it. Being animate and eco-friendly are the noteworthy features which make this culture distinct from others. Moreover these features provoke African people against colonization and exploitation. Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is discussed based on the eco-critical study and the concept of colonization. Since these two concepts form essential aspects of life experience in Africa, this study tries to analyze them and examine them in the African context. This novel depicts Africa before colonization as a society which still had its bond with Nature and was trying to preserve it against the invasion of colonizers. Achebe has always tried to focus the attention of his people to these issues to revive the original African culture. The aim of this study is to reveal this attempt through various events and characters in the body of the novel. It attempts to retrace the historical developments and new implications of eco-critical study vis-à-vis colonialism as one of the disputed concepts focusing on Achebe's novel as well.

Keywords: eco-criticism, colonialism, Chinua Achebe, things fall apart.

INTRODUCTION

Every day the number of people who are living on the earth is increasing. While this growing number is consuming and producing for its needs, it pays no attention to the damage caused on the earth. The study and consideration of this matter started from the eighteenth century (Rigby, 2002, pp. 151-152). Later this study was called Ecocriticism. Based on the definition of Richard Kerridge (2006), Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural movement which studies and criticizes texts based on their relationships with Nature. The texts are divided into two groups; those which are beneficial to nature and those which are harmful to it. Ecocriticism is concerned with the environmental results of human's everyday actions and the damage they may cause to nature (p. 530).

One reason for which human beings cause damage on the earth is because they think the sole function of the earth is to provide humans' needs. This view is the outcome of the change of definition of universe through the time. In the ancient times, people used to describe universe as an "organism", but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was defined as a machine (Collingwood, 1945, pp. 4-9, 93). Ecocritics have tried to discover the cause of separation between human beings and nature. Based on their findings, this separation has been started from the age of "enlightenment humanism" with the theories of Rene Descartes. Descartes asserted that thinking and understanding are the most important concepts which differentiate humans from non-humans (Kerridge, 2006, p. 539). Since then science was divided into

two different branches as the "natural" and the "human". People considered these two concepts quite distinct from each other so they started using nature as a means for their needs and aims (Rigby, 2002, p. 152).

As the damages of Descartes' theory on the natural world were gradually recognized by theorists, they formed the Ecocritical movement. In Rigby's words "at the end of the twentieth century, the study of literature and environment was recognized as a subject on the rise" (2002, p. 152). Ecocriticism questioned the egocentric Western idea, "the great chain of being", which placed man lower than angels and higher than any other earthly creatures.

Although some disciplines like theology or history found new ways of thinking about the relationship between nature, culture and society, it took a long time for literary critics and theorists to recognize these changes (2002, p. 152). As Zolfagharkhani mentioned in his article "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: An Ecocritical Study", movements such as postcolonialism and feminism tend to argue about social injustice among the minority or the group of people who are marginalized and exploited (2010, p. 147). Conversely ecocriticism gives priority to nature rather than human beings and considers nonhuman nature as the most important issue and this is the criteria which makes ecocriticism different from other critical movements (Parra, 1999, p. 1099).

Ecocritics are searching for new ways to reunite human beings with nature and fight against the

dualism of nature/culture (Kerridge, 2006, p. 539). In Rigby's words to create a unity between "nature and culture", "earth and artifact" and "consumption and destruction", we should overcome the obstacle of modernity and human selfishness. As a matter of fact having relationship with original cultures and imitating their life style can replace the harmful industrial developments with something more eco-friendly (2006, p. 530).

Critics mentioned that the preservation of nature is connected with social justice. Rousseau insisted that with the spread of civilization and its superiority over nature, equality gradually faded (Rigby, 2002, p. 163). An evaluation of texts based on the "environmental justice" will bring up the concepts of "class", "race" and "colonialism". It will also disqualify the protection of "wild nature" as the sole purpose of this study (Kerridge, 2006, p. 531). Murphy pinpointed that Ecocriticism should remain a "pivotal" theory and its basic concepts should not be definite so that they can be revised during the time (2009, p. 12).

Chinua Achebe

The appearance of African novel which was written by African writers and was set in Africa started in 1950s. African writers tried different ways to set their country free from its stereotype. One way to get this freedom was the rediscovery of Africa's past through historical studies. In this process they tried to gather the remained pieces of information about Africa's history and create its real history before the colonialism (Carroll, 1990, p. 7). The novels of great African writers such as Chinua Achebe have played a great role in changing the general outlook towards Africans. Africa and African life which have been described by some of the African writers are totally different from the descriptions of European writers such as Joseph Conrad (1990, p. 11).

Since among African writers, Achebe who experienced living in a colony is known as the reviver of original African culture, the researcher chose him and his first important novel as the true emblems of ecocriticism and colonialism in Africa. The study of Achebe's other novels is beyond the scope of this study.

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 in Nigeria and his parents were devout Christians. His family was educated and belonged to the higher class. Since they spoke English, they had a privileged status in that time. Although they lived, according to Achebe, in the "crossroads of cultures", where the majority of the people had a different style of life, from that of his family and the Christian minority, they could get along with each other and live in peace (Chua, 1996, p. 6). The colonial situation had a great influence upon the life and education of most African writers

such as Chinua Achebe and it became the subject of their novels too. In his early education, Chinua studied in church school. He won a scholarship to study at the Government College between 1944 and 1948. During this period, the would-be famous Nigerian writers attended this College too (Msiska and Whittaker, 2007, p. 4). Achebe was a gifted student. He won a scholarship to study medicine, but after a while he gave it up and decided to study English literature, religious studies and history. The reaction of Achebe to the presentation of African people and Africa in European novels has had a great influence on his novels. Achebe did not believe in the stereotypes that European writers had created about Africa in their works. He helped the reader to develop a new understanding about the history, culture and place of Africa in the world. Achebe obtained an honors degree in English in 1953. For a short time he worked as a teacher, and then he became an editor for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). During these days he wrote his first novel that was known as a classic *Things Fall Apart* (1994).

The novel has been translated into forty five languages and has sold several million copies. It was first published in London by Heinemann on June 1958. The novel was confronted with critical skepticism but then it became so famous and established the position of Chinua Achebe in the world of literature (Carroll, 1990, p.4). Achebe was the first one who invented the African culture. He was also the first person who created a new African literary tradition. Like any other Nigerian writer, he believes that literary writings must deal primarily with the problems of society. He asserts that "art is, and always was, at the service of man...any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose" (1990, p. 8).

Achebe asserted that in societies which solidarity and community is more important than individuality, the didactic potential of novels is very important. In one of his essays "The Novelist as Teacher", he highlights educating as one of the important duties of the novelist. The writer must teach his reader about his country and what he needs to know is to avoid the colonial power. There are two explanations about why the function of literature in Africa is to serve society. The first one is that African literature was produced as a counter-discourse to the presentation of Africa in the literature of colonial period. The second one is the understanding that it is the role of the writers and critics to be the guide for their society (Achebe, 2007, p. 102).

Ecocriticism vs. Colonialism

As it was mentioned, social and environmental justice is an important issue in ecocritical studies; consequently writings about justice in Africa raise the subject of colonialism. Thus discussing the situation

of the colonizer and the colonized is vital in this study. In European's mind, Africans were divided into two groups, the "noble savage" and the "depraved cannibal". The noble savage was a man in Nature and this nature was related to "primitivistic myth". But this myth was against the idea of progress. Based on the ideas of Darwin and Linnaeus, Negroes were located at the end of the Great Chain of Being. These ideas made the black people think they are naturally inferior to Europeans and it was an excuse for the slave trade. The Europeans in the colony tried to institutionalize the life of African people and this was the method by which they imposed their rule over the colony. The Africans who were separated from their safe tribal life had to change their old traditional style of life into the new principled style. The colonizer labeled African beliefs and rituals as barbaric, and presented his own culture as elevated and civilized. After destroying indigenous African culture, the colonizer replaced it with his own culture. In this way, Africans lost their religion, culture and identity. Chinua Achebe has tried to remind the Africans about their original identity before colonialism (Carroll, 1990, pp. 7-9).

Achebe's writings cover a variety of subjects, but they express three basic themes. First, he always rejects the idea that Africa is considered as Europe's foil. In his famous article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", He remarked that in the European works like *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the relation of Africa to Europe is like the picture to Dorian Gray. Europe projects his deformities to the Africa, so that he could always remain clean. Achebe highlighted this matter in his novels. If Africa is not a foil to Europe, it must prove this matter by creating new alternatives for the Europe's system of values and ideas. This stage forms the second theme. The third theme is the importance of literature in the social and political field. Achebe has always asserted that this is one of the most important roles of literature (1988, pp. 251-261).

Things Fall Apart (1994)

From the moment we start our life on the earth, we start to know the world through culture and language. Nature which in Williams' words is the most complex word in language is also known through these tools (1983, p.154). *Things Fall Apart* as Achebe's first novel is an influential story which helps the reader to develop a new understanding about the history, culture and place of Africa. Besides describing the life of African people before and during the colonization, this novel depicts the close relationship between the indigenous African life and nature. In this novel all of the stories which were narrated for the children were about nature and animals. Children had a close relationship with these

concepts and could understand the meaning behind the story.

(Nwoye) He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men.(Achebe, 1994, p. 86).

In fact, through these African narratives children learned about their original culture and the close relationship between nature and human beings. These stories taught humanity and morality with variant symbols in nature and proved that respecting nature is the corollary of these factors.

In some cultures it is believed that nature is silent, so people cannot communicate with it. But it has been suggested that human's refusal to listen causes this lack of communication. In fact, people are incapable of talking with nature, because they consider language as an ability which solely belongs to humans. This problem in Rigby's words does not belong to "animistic cultures" (Rigby, 2002, p. 165).

African people considered earth, sky, animals, etc as alive characters that were capable of listening and communicating, "A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string." (Achebe, 1994, p. 16).

Incidentally religion is one of the basic aspects of culture. Religion shapes people's outlook toward the world and their lives. It also guides people in their style of life and decisions. African religion system consists of three belief modes: "the worship of the great public deities, the cult of personal gods, and the worship of ancestors" (Carroll, 1990, p. 16). Africans believe in a supreme God, named chukwu, who is in the sky and is responsible for fertility and creation. Although he does not receive sacrifices, the minor deities are his intermediaries and send sacrifices to him. There is no hierarchy among the minor deities, but Ala the earth Goddess is considered as the most powerful. Ancestors are under the power of Ala and are her agents in the control of morality. The third category of believes belongs to the personal god or chi. Chukwu grants each person at the moment of conception a chi which is a soul or a personal double. The chi is responsible for the person's destiny and controls the life of the person. In the African society there is a constant relationship between the world of the living and the dead (1990, p. 17).

The effect of religion as a component in national, social and personal identity is quite clear. In fact, religion is itself a form of social identity (Aschroft,

et.al, 1995, p. 199). Based on African religious ideas, people respected the goddess earth and believed that she could curse them for their evil actions, so in the planting season they tried to avoid committing a crime or sin.

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 honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow.... 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.(Achebe, 1994, p. 50)

The animate culture of Africa was based on the rules of nature; therefore it did not allow its people to treat each other with cruelty. When African people asked for the nature's blessing, they had to avoid injustice and immorality. Not only did nature have an impact on people's morality, but also it affected their decisions.

In fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle_ the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war (Achebe, 1994, p. 11)

Every element of nature had an oracle on the earth and these Oracles had a leading rule in the life of African people. In fact, in the triangle of nature, religion and human being, these Oracles which were the most important components of religion made the communication between the other two parts possible. Before making decisions, Africans consulted with nature to get assured whether their mother earth would allow them.

The culture of African people did not allow them to abuse nature. In fact, they asked their needs from the earth and sacrificed to appreciate its gifts and favors. The reason for which the colonizer tried to destroy this culture was because this culture did not allow the colonizer to exploit human beings and nature. Besides respecting nature, people had to respect themselves too, because they were considered as the children of the earth. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against 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 " (Achebe, 1994, p. 328).

One of the important aims of the European colonizers was to convert African people into Christianity, because they knew that African religion was an

important part of African culture. P'Bitek declared in his article:

The religion of a people is perhaps the most important aspect of their culture. What they believe governs their lives. It provides their "world-view" – the general direction along which they live their lives, and relate to each other and the universe. It guides them in their conduct of war and peace. It is the basis of their behavior towards one another. The knowledge of the religions of our people is the key to the knowledge of our culture (O'Imbo, 2004, p. 364).

Incidentally, White believes that the relationship of human beings with nature is formed by their thoughts and religion. He criticized the story of creation in Genesis 1 because it demonstrated man and nature as two separate concepts. He claimed that men have to use nature for their needs (1996, pp. 6-10). Although he criticized the story of creation, his criticism does not refer directly to the Bible as a religious text. Bible is a complicated text which can be interpreted in different ways. What White criticized was the way through which Western Christianity interprets this text (Rigby, 2002, p. 155). Christian missionaries claimed that the cause of their progress and affluence was the Bible; therefore for the Africans to achieve the same prosperity, they had to obey the sacred book and the rules of the missionaries.

Colonizers undermined African culture and ideas such as their gods which had had a great role in African society. The missionaries had to label the African beliefs and rituals as barbaric and savage so that their own culture seemed praiseworthy. The Africans, after being converted into Christianity, lost their old supporting identity (Carroll, 1990, p. 9).

CONCLUSION

Things Fall Apart is the prime example of the original African culture. Achebe is known as the first African writer who constructed this culture and skillfully described the life of African people before and after colonization. Since social and environmental justice is an important issue in eco-critical study, discussing the concept of colonization is vital in this article. The true African culture, disseminating morality and humanity, was in close connection with nature, so it could pose a threat to the colonizers. Consequently, the colonizers attempted to wipe out this culture in order to enslave Africans. The pre-colonial African culture was merged with religion which itself was full of natural concepts. After overcoming African culture and religion, the colonizers and their Christian missionaries started spreading their own culture and founding their colony which is an obvious sign of the destruction of Nature.

To summarize the key points, this article attempted to reveal how an original culture which was merged with Nature affected the behavior and thought of its people. Later, colonialism as one of the main tools which separated people from nature was discussed. Although Africans tried to resist the colonizers and protect their original culture, the ideology of the colonizer overcame their mentality and caused things to fall apart.

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