



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

Rohit Prasad Baral 

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

Article History: Submitted 10 May 2024; Reviewed 10 June 2024; Revised 05 July 2024

Corresponding Author: Rohit Prasad Baral, Email: rohitprasadbaral@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ojes.v15i1.67767>

Abstract

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 claims 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 arrival of the British colony in India caused terrible deforestation and cultural fall. It is a textual analysis of the novel. The paper concludes that colonialism through its infrastructural development caused deforestation and loss of natural and cultural wilderness.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, colonialism, environmental degradation, ecological consciousness

Introduction

Since the beginning of human civilization, there has been a conflicting and contradictory relationship between nature and human beings. Over the time, human beings seem to get victory over nature as nature is kept under the grip of them. In general, there is a contradiction between the human population and the world of nature. When the human population increases, there is a decrease in the number of plants, trees, and other ecological phenomena. Human beings' political, economic, physical, and other activities put a terrible pressure on the environmental world. The reality of this world is that human beings are only part of the ecosystem but not the owners. In the human history, there was a terrible crisis in the world of trees when there was rapid growth in population and the demographic graph was high. Rapid deforestation due to huge population incensement and the crisis in human development was high in different periods. Similarly, plants exist in nature and without it no life is possible. But ruthless

Copyright 2024 © The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC 4.0\) License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



exploitation of nature is in all times of history; thus, it is a matter of academic discussion. In this regard, Pabitra Baral writes, "As the issue of environmental crisis has mostly been the concerns of environmental science and many more other academic subjects as well as literary criticism" (63). As the human population increases in the world, there has been an environmental crisis, this very issue becomes a concern of many academic subjects for discussion.

In the past, the issue of environment was the most important and influential subject in English literature during the British Romantic Period (1798 to 18320). Most of the writers of this period praised and glorified nature and the environment. The Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, John Keats, P. B. Shelley, and many others incorporated the ingredients from nature in their poetic works. For instance, Wordsworth writes, "man and nature as essentially adapted to each other and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and the most interesting qualities of nature" (20). This reference indicates that man and nature are integral to this creation and civilization. The Romantic movement in English literature made nature as its content, presenting it beautifully with harmony between humans and nature. The harmony of humans with nature arrived as dirty, damaged, and barren in the first half of the twentieth century. The poem *The Waste Land* has presented nature as sterile, barren, and waste. Nature is the content of writing for almost all writers in one or another form. Joy A. Palmer in *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment* writes, "Most importantly, all people in the book have made every substantial contribution to environmental thinking in some form or another" (XIV). The environmental study is such a subject that automatically comes directly or indirectly in every writing. As the British Romantic poets made this subject the main content of their writing, the American writers like Ralph Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and David Thoreau made nature as the subject matter of their writing. In the history of American literature, the poets were even called the nature poets. About the legacy of the writing of American writers, Peter Barry claims, "Its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose works celebrated nature, the life force and the wideness as manifested in America, these beings Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and David Henry Thoreau" (249). Apart from these writers, many other writers and thinkers have contributed their writing to the environmental issue and made it their subject matter.

The development works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had destroyed the environment devastatingly all over the world. Many writers now pay homage to the destruction of nature rather than glorifying nature. In this case, the critical theory such as ecocriticism appeared with the thoughts and worries of the thinkers. The credit goes to Cheryll Glotfelty in America and Jonathan Bate in England for the birth of ecocriticism as a literary theory. An organization named the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) came into existence for the discussion, exchange, and promotion of ideas and information about the condition of the environment and its impact on human life, which was led by the environmental activist Glotfelty. As for the objective of the association, he claims that "to encourage new writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature and interdisciplinary environmental research" (xv). It was a new initiation of research and innovation on the environmental issues in literature. Ecocriticism emerged in America in the late 1980s whereas in England it came up in the name of Green Studies in the 1990s (Barry 251). This sort of eco-critical reading is needed in academia because the developmental works, colonialism, and imperialism have destroyed the environment in the world.

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* Goddess, 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 the 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* is a text about the falling apart of the native and pure culture of Igbo people in the land Umuofia and the neighbouring villages in Nigeria. Before and after the arrival of the white man as missionaries in the country, 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 critics claim, "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 fulfil 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. As this paper has claimed 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 unit 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, "[W]e 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 evillest 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: "[T]he 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 python" (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 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.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Books, 1958.
- Baral, Pabitra Raj. "Ecocriticism: An Environmental Approach to Literary Studies." *The Outlook Journal of English Studies*, vol. VII, 2013, pp 61-75.

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed., Manchester UP, 2002.
- Chaudhary, Ram Prasad, Yadav Uprety, and Sagar Kumar Rimal. "Deforestation in Nepal: Causes, Consequences and Responses." *Biological and Environmental Hazards, Risks, and Disasters*. Elsevier Inc., 2016, pp 335-72.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. Routledge, 2004.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Georgia Press, 1996, pp. xv-xxxvii.
- Gogoi, Gitanjali. "An Ecocritical Approach to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 19, no. 11 (version 5), November 2014, pp. 1-4, <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol19-issue11/Version-5/A0191150104.pdf>.
- Goshkheteliani, Irine. "Cultural Implications in English and Georgian Proverbs." *Paremiologia Y Herencia Cultural. Coleccion Granada Lingvistica*. Shota Rustaveli State U, 2011, pp. 275-84.
- Guha, Ramachandra. "Colonialism, Capitalism and Deforestation." *Social Scientist*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1983, 61-64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517025>.
- Irele, F. Abiola. "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 3, fall 2000, pp. 1-40.
- Mosley, Stephen. *The Environment in World History*. Routledge, 2010.
- Palmer, Joy. A Preface. *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, edited by Jay Palmer, David E. Cooper, and David Cooper, Routledge, 2001, pp. xii-xiv.
- Searle, Alison. "The Role of Missions in *Things Fall Apart* and Nervous Conditions." *Literature and Theology*. Oxford UP, 2007, pp. 49-65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frl061>.
- Strong-Leek, Linda. "Reading as a Woman: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Feminist Criticism." *African Studies Quarterly*, 2001, pp. 29-36.
- Wordsworth, William. "Primary Laws." *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, edited by Laurence Coupe, Routledge, 2008, pp. 17-20.