

ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AS A STUDY IN ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart is a novel that focuses on the need for cultural reclamation from the colonisers. The Igbo community, before the arrival of the colonisers, represents an ecological sphere of existence, that has integrated well into the natural habitat around them. Achebe portrays an agrarian society that patiently negotiates with the land that sustains it. The term 'ecological imperialism' was coined by the British environmental historian, Alfred Crosby, to denote violent territorial transgressions or ill-considered introduction of European agricultural practices into indigenous societies. Imperialism, according to Said, 'is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, chartered and finally brought under control'. It is in this context that Things Fall Apart becomes a relevant study in ecological imperialism. This paper tries to analyse the various meanings that the Igbo community associates with land and what it entails for them, by analysing postcolonial and ecocritical theories. This study also makes an attempt to understand the impact of the loss of land to the colonised and how the destruction of land could be an attempt at erasing collective memory itself.

Key Words: Colonized, ecocriticism, imperialism, land, postcolonialism.

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, European colonial expansion on the African continent was initiated with the primary intention of economic exploitation. Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, exploitation or development of resources and the way in which indigenous people are forcefully governed. (Boehmer 3) Colonialism not only dehumanized the colonized, but also alienated them. The colonized were perceived only in terms of their value for the promotion and well-being of the colonisers. (Sakhkhane 89) According to Ngugi wa Thiong, adding on to all this, is the psychological alienation experienced by the colonized people. They were expected to evaluate the world, according to the way it was viewed by the Europeans, and hence were presented with a distorted image of themselves. (Sakhkhane 180) Albert Memmi also opines that the colonized are never considered as individuals and end up drowning in an anonymous collectivity. (Sakhkhane 89) Thus, colonialist literature primarily dealt with the superiority of the European culture and the justification of imperialism.

All ideas of imperial domination and control, work on the premise that the colony is inhabited by the 'other', who must be subjugated. Imperialism as an economic and political activity, explicitly stood for land grabbing and annihilation of humanity. It survived for long, as it was propagated as an ideology that was credible and legitimate. Frantz Fanon points out that colonialism not only enslaved people, both physically and mentally, but also disfigured and destroyed their past. (Sakhkhane 96) The colonized are frozen into a state of speechlessness and inarticulation. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, explains how, being a white man was in a way, 'taking hold of reality, language and thought'. (227) The most severe impact of colonialism was the 'colonising of the mind'- the coloniser making the colonised feel that they are the rightful rulers and getting them to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things. (McLeod 18) Hence, what was required was decolonising the mind. (McLeod 22) This was what postcolonial literatures actively engaged in.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism is a reaction to the negative representations and characterizations of the 'other', by the colonialist writers. Postcolonial writers, on the other hand, deal with the experiences of the colonized. They deconstructed ideas that supported colonization and experiences of cultural exclusion under the colonial rule. These writers make an attempt to reclaim spaces taken over by the colonisers. Critics like Gayathri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Franz Fanon etc. try to dismantle the western stereotypes of the colonized, attempt to reconstruct images of the colonized and narrate stories from the perspectives of the suppressed. (Sakhkhane, 57) European critical theories deal with the questions of language, identity, culture, race and gender. Chinua Achebe too, in his *Things Fall Apart*, records the fragmentation of the Igbo community, as a consequence of the imperialistic rule, and how the protagonist, Okonkwo, refuses to accept the culture of the colonizers.

Homi Bhabha introduces the term 'hybridity' to indicate a method deployed by the colonisers to delink the colonial subjects from their cultural heritage and identity. 'It is a textual stratagem designed to implode imperial systems of representation. Thus, not only are the colonized perceived as a hybrid, but even the colonizers pay the cost of their imperial aggressions with cultural miscegenation'. (Sakhkhane, 98) Hybridity is a response that destabilizes colonial fixity and rigidity. Bhabha employs hybridity to challenge the colonial position, to expose and to question the attempts at justifying colonial interventions based on cultural concepts. (Ramone113) Bhabha also refers to the concept of 'mimicry' as the most indefinable and effective strategies used to exhibit colonial power and knowledge. Mimic men are the colonised people, who are taught by the colonisers to act like them, in order to help them with their administrative works, but are not accepted, nor looked upon on par with the colonisers. According to Bhabha, this does not indicate the colonised succumbing to the power of the coloniser, but challenge the representations that attempt to stereotype them. This paper will also analyse the ideas of ambivalence, hybridity and mimic put forward by Homi Bhabha, as part of postcolonial discourse, and see how appropriately they blend with Achebe's novel. Ambivalence is a term used in psychoanalysis to refer to the state of wanting something and at the same time not wanting it. The coloniser is attracted to the colonised because of certain reasons, but is ambivalent about his attitude to the colonised. The subaltern often mimics the coloniser, hoping to attain the superior position of the colonised. The colonised subject is constructed through the use of ambivalence, stereotypes and repetition. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is simultaneously a symbol of resistance and subversion- how the coloniser and the colonised are forged in relationship with each other. Thus, there can be no pure identity. (Rita 204)

Ecological Imperialism

Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* states that imperialism is settling and controlling land that one does not possess and involves untold misery for the original inhabitants. (6) The main battle in imperialism, is over land. There are only two options left for the colonised to serve or to get destroyed. (Said 216) The study of literature with respect to nature and environment is referred to as ecocriticism. This theory attempts to do away with the binaries of nature and culture and tries to reinforce how both are inseparable. European colonialism is one of the main factors that lead to the massive exploitation of nature and its resources.

Postcolonial ecocritics have been influenced by the writings of the British environmentalists, Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove, whose works focus on the historical embeddedness of ecology in the European imperial enterprise. The term 'ecological imperialism' was first used by Alfred Crosby to refer to the violent destruction of indigenous land and introduction of European agricultural practices, under the imperialistic rule and the radical ecological changes wrought by empire. (Triffin3) Crosby highlights how, wherever the Europeans went, they changed the local habitat. Their conscious aim was to transform territories into images of what they had left behind. This process was an ongoing one and gradually turned the colony into a completely new place, infected with diseases, environmental imbalances and traumatic

dislocations for the native inhabitants. (Said 288) Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, makes this clear when he says that 'imperialism is an act of geographical violence by which every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control'. (77) A changed ecology in turn, has given way to a changed political system. He says, the beginning of servitude is with the loss of locality to the coloniser and there is an urgent need to restore its geographical identity, which can initially happen only through literary imagination. Postcolonial ecocriticism is deeply concerned with the ways in which empire has abused and exploited both people and their environment. (Handley 81) It also focusses on how geography has been radically altered by colonialism. Franz Fanon, in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, refers to how, for the colonized people, the most valuable treasure is the land, which gives them their daily bread and dignity. (9) Northrop Frye, the Canadian literary critic emphasises on the importance of the geographic location in the formation of identity. As positionality and place define one's identity, geographic location is crucial to postcolonial theory. (Burney 44) Colonial experiences that have impacted the subaltern, the marginalising and silencing that imperialism imposes, become the focus of postcolonial theories and the impact on the Igbo community will be examined in this paper.

Analysis of *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, anticipates Said's emphasis on the need for literary imagination to respond to the loss of locality to the outsider. Achebe himself has confessed that his novel was a counter narrative to the negative representation of Africa, in European literature. (Irele ix) The story is set in the village called, Umuofia, which literally means 'people of the forest'. The forest denotes an existence, where people are fully integrated into the natural environment around them. Various instances in the novel corroborate this. Yam, is the primary crop of this community, which is not just a commodity for them, but represents a whole culture and value system. This is well evident in the way the cultivation of yam is described. Achebe describes a community that draws lot of energy and sustenance from the land, enriched with the worship of nature deities, specifically, Agbala, the Oracle, in whose name, sacred spaces like caves and hills were consecrated and who was consulted whenever major decisions had to be taken. (Irele xii) The concern and care for all life forms around them is made clear when Nwakibie says: "We care for life, children, a good harvest and happiness... Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break". (Achebe 150) Thus, the first part of the novel presents to the readers the picture of a well-knit organic community, rooted in traditions and customs that are largely focused on nature. It is in this rustic setting that Achebe positions the protagonist, Okonkwo, 'the man of action.'

The Feast of New Yam was celebrated to honour the ancestors of the clan and also to express gratitude to Ani, the earth goddess, the source of all fertility. She played a crucial role in the lives of the Igbo community and was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. Ancestors were also revered and looked upon always as a source of inspiration and blessing for the current generation. This becomes clear in the lines: "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors". (73) As the first part concludes, Okonkwo is exiled, for inadvertently being part of the ritual killing of Ikemefuna. The community considers this action of Okonkwo as a crime that he has committed against the earth goddess. The demolition of his house is actually the process of cleansing the land, which Okonkwo had polluted. "The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others'. (74) These lines illustrate the reverence that the Igbo community had for land and how they worshipped land as the goddess of Earth. Any harm or damage to her well-being will not be tolerated, even if it is at the cost of expelling a fellow being from their community. This stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of modern man, who would not hesitate in violating and

destroying land and space, for his own personal and material benefits. The village is held together on the basis of the understanding that the community is greater than the individual.

The second part of the novel is located in Okonkwo's maternal village of Mbanta, where he is living in exile. The joyous and festive mood at Mbanta gets disturbed with the news of the arrival of the white man in Umuofia. Even more disturbing is the information that his son has accepted Christianity. The readers too, get a foreboding of things in store for the native people, with the arrival of the colonisers. The third part focuses on the trauma inflicted on the indigenous people, by the imperial forces and the obvious conflict of cultures, with the introduction of Christianity. The new faith, according to the community, was a mad dog that had come to eat them up. (83) The missionaries, on the other hand, tell the natives that they are worshipping gods made of wood and stone and that they are false gods. The church in the Evil Forest, symbolises the reversal of the traditional order and a powerful intrusion into the collective conscious of the people. The church also stands for territorial domination that is set in motion by the imperialists, usurping land from the natives. However, the focus on literacy, introduction of modern medicine etc. are signs of modernity, that are welcomed. The novel simultaneously becomes a mode for embracing modernity and also an attempt at regaining a threatened past and selfhood. (Irelexxi) This idea is reflected in the conflict between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye, who easily embraces Christianity. The killing of Ikemefuna, is a major turning point in the story. The rift between Okonkwo and his son begins after this. The young boy's ritual killing is an act against nature in which Okonkwo participates. This is also the reason why Nwoye embraces Christianity, as he was not able to comprehend the rationale behind such ritualistic sacrifices that his community practised. This act of his son, is something that Okonkwo finds difficult to digest, as he sees it as a complete negation of the customs and traditions that his community had been following for centuries.

Apart from the church, another structure that comes up on Igbo land, is the court, where the district commissioner judged cases. With the establishment of the court, decisions too go in favour of people who are supportive of the white man. This creates a situation where in, members of the Igbo community turn against their own brethren. This can be summed up in the response that Obierika gives: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart". (100) The harsh reality that stares at Okonkwo and his friend is that, things have truly fallen apart and that nothing is going to stop the white man's domination over them. Soon a school and hospital are built. Mr. Brown succeeds in persuading the members of the Igbo community to send their children to school. "New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand". (103) As more and more land is taken away, the colonisers become more authoritative and commanding. The inherent contradictions that are there in imperialism, can be seen here too. Though the coloniser sees his culture and values superior to that of the natives, he wouldn't hesitate in using force to whatever extent possible, to implement their agenda. In the novel, we see this being practised in various ways, especially for those natives who favour the white rule, special considerations are shown, jobs assured and decisions coming from courts go in their favour. According to Charles Mills, the establishment of a new society simply means the denial of one that already existed. (Irele334)

The impact of the colonial regime is Okonkwo's suicide, at the end of the novel. "Okonkwo's end was not only that of an obstinate hero running his head against a machine too big for him, it was the end of a way of life". (Irele264) Obierika, Okonkwo's friend says: "That man was one of the greatest men of Ufomia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (117) The Commissioner steps in, in the end and declares that the story of the man who hanged himself would make good reading. This clearly indicates the flawed narratives that colonizers have engaged themselves with, and Achebe's call to revolt and make claim for a new representation. It is Okonkwo's inability to change, his clinging on to the past that brings about his self-destruction. The unity and community living that the Igbo community had nurtured for so long, starts disintegrating with the imposition of ideas from the colonisers. "The central

theme of the novel is what happens to the values that define Okonkwo's cultural community, and his own sense of moral order, when the institutions he had fought so hard to sustain, collapse in the face of European colonialism". (Irele 298)

The narrator in the novel, comments on the burial ground as, 'the land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them.' (122) There is also reference to how, in the Igbo community, from birth to death, a man's life comprises of series of events, which invariably brings him close to his ancestors and land. Women, who hoped to get pregnant would visit an ancient silk-cotton tree, which was supposed to be sacred and held the spirits of good children, that were expected to be born. After the colonisers enter the native land, one of the characters wonders whether the white man understands their custom about land. The response from another character is that: "How can he, when he does not even speak our tongue?" Edouard Glissant, in his *Caribbean Discourse* argues that "the individual, the community, the land: are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood". (105-106)

As the novel progresses, colonisers take over the land and the native inhabitants move from a bonding with land, conceived by their ancestors, as one rooted in language and cosmology, to that of an abstract and alien Christian god, that the colonisers have brought in. A similar idea is highlighted by Donald Worster, in his book, *Nature's economy*, when he refers to how Christian imperialism stripped from nature, all spiritual qualities and rigidly distanced it from human feelings. (29) The Christian missionaries dismiss the Igbo Gods as gods of deceit and the community is forced to embrace 'only one true God' who controls 'the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us' (146). In the final scene, we see that the Igbo ancestral landscape has given way to a foreign colonial court, which finds Okonkwo guilty, leading to his suicide. This act of killing oneself, is seen by the community as 'an offense against the Earth' (207). The commissioner's idea of noting this event in a book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, clearly indicates the shift in the narrative to a colonial perspective. In *Things Fall Apart*, it can be seen that the environment and land are non-human witnesses to the violent and traumatic impositions of colonialism. Destruction of land and sea, for the Igbo community, becomes an act of violence against collective memory itself. Achebe's novel thus, highlights the need to restore nature and the precolonial past. The use of Igbo words is an attempt in this regard to give a local flavour to the English language and also an attempt at asserting the African identity that had been erased by the colonisers.

The strict adherence to rituals and customs is part and parcel of Igbo life. This also keeps them in touch with their ancestors, from whom they constantly keep seeking blessings for all auspicious occasions, guiding their collective life and consciousness. All this get threatened and questioned, with the arrival of the white man. Okonkwo's suicide is not an event that can be reduced to just a paragraph in a book that the European intends to write, it is a tragedy that occurs as a consequence of the complete erasure of a culture from collective memory and consciousness. Achebe tries to highlight the need to reclaim this lost culture, through the novel. Okonkwo's suicide is a consequence of the epistemic violence inflicted on the collective psyche of Igboland, by the coloniser. (Burney 57) "They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man's god will not last" (Irele, 83). The missionaries were given land in the Evil Forest, a place where people infected with leprosy and small pox were buried a place of ill-omen for the native people, to build their church. This was done with the expectation that inauspicious things would happen to the missionaries and they would quit Umoufia. But this did not happen. On the contrary, they were seen flourishing. Gradually, native medicines also give way to white man's medicine. "It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming - it's own death". (Irele 106)

Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, ambivalence and mimic emerge clearly in *Things Fall Apart*. The ambivalent approach to Christianity in the beginning, gives way to lot more natives converting. Mr. Brown

too, approaches the natives strategically and finally succeeds in making friends with some of the great men of the clan. He goes from house to house, asking families to send their children to school, failing which, strangers from other lands could come and rule them. The Igbo community also practised mimicking as those employed in the court were English speaking natives. After school, they were appointed as messengers and clerks in courts, and even as teachers. This gave the natives a superior feeling that they too were one among the white man, though the white man never considered them on par. The various rituals, customs and traditions that the Igbo community religiously followed, is seen slowly vanishing. Okonkwo initially succeeds in mobilising few men in resisting the colonisers. Temporary victory is achieved when they demolish the church.

Frantz Fanon, in his *Wretched of the Earth*, explains how imperialism and colonial domination instil self-hatred and a feeling of inferiority amongst the native. (Burney 50) It is this feeling, supplemented with the inability to accept the cultural changes, that forces Okonkwo to commit suicide. According to Fanon, language is another tool used by the coloniser to negate the native culture. The white man's attempts at Anglicising the natives, so that they can help with odd jobs and how they vigorously push this agenda forward, is very evident in the novel. This is one way of robbing the natives of word, speech and voice, which is another major theme of postcolonial theory.

Conclusion

Postcolonial theories examine the impact of European imperialism on the colonized countries and how this can change the narrative of colonial discourse itself. Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* refers to how 'everything about human history is rooted in the earth'. (5) The Igbo community's life during the pre-colonial period, strongly demonstrates this a way of living, that was completely entangled with the earth. It is this kind of an existence, devoid of a nature/culture binary, that fostered their very identity. This is what gets shaken and uprooted, through ecological imperialism. The white man's statement that only one God exists who controls "the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us" (Irele, 87), sums up their attitude to nature as the 'other'. Thus, nature and the colonised are destroyed and devastated, in the colonisers bid for territorial expansion.

The arrival of the white man on Igbo soil, symbolises the need for the community to change. Okonkwo's tragic death is a consequence of his inability to adapt to the new culture. His death is symbolic of what is in store for the community, with the arrival of foreigners. It is in this context that Achebe's novel gains significance, as it looks at the impact of colonialism on the subalterns and their culture, and how geography and landscapes get altered. The novel is a 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak) as it not only reminds the natives of the glory of their own culture, but also reinforces a cultural identity that has been suppressed by the colonisers. (Burney, 56) Achebe concludes the novel with the expectation that the European narrative can be subverted, with a recuperated one from the suppressed voices. The urgency to reclaim Igbo land and culture, which could be erased from collective memory and consciousness, is very evident in the way the novel concludes.

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