

ECOFEMINIST COLOURINGS IN THE WORKS OF CHINUA ACHEBE AND THOMAS HARDY

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Abstract: *The current global environmental crises urged me to investigate the manner in which writers from different backgrounds represent man's relationship with nature in their texts and how they tie it to feminist dynamics. More precisely, the work focuses on the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's trilogy Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God and the English writer Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. The research question that guides the work is: how do Chinua Achebe and Thomas Hardy represent the connection between environmental issues and gender considerations? The hypothesis is based on the premise that the two authors represent the environment and feminine realities with hints to the need for more protection. Second Wave Ecocriticism as outlined by Lawrence Buell and Ecofeminism according to Paul Sanders Quick constitute the theoretical framework while the Comparative Approach of Tötösy de Zepetnek that stresses on an international dimension is the methodology used to bring out the ecofeminist visions of the two writers in the above-mentioned texts.*

KEYWORDS: environment, fiction, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, comparative analysis, degradation, protection, vision

INTRODUCTION

The ecosystem is threatened by several factors and this has raised serious concerns among people in all corners of the globe. This environmental menace has become so serious that if nothing significant is done urgently, man's existence on earth is under threat. In line with this, Tosic (2006: 44) says "[...] man feels *vitally* threatened in the ecologically degraded world. Overexploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet (Earth)."

Literature can play a great role in environmental protection, albeit through the sensitization of readers, and this is exactly what this work is out to demonstrate. Handley (2007: 27) affirms that literature can help in ameliorating our relationship with the environment as he opines that "[...] we need environmentally oriented literature more than ever, especially if it can remind us, as Jonathan Bate suggests, that "Although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live

apart from the world". Glotfelty and Fromm (1996: xxi) quote environmental historian Donald Woster as stating:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding.

The raising of consciousness in environmental thinking and the serious ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the global ecological crisis oblige literary scholars to recognize the important role literature and criticism play in understanding man's vital position in the ecosphere. Therefore, literature can be usefully examined as having great bearing on man and his practical relation to the natural world in which he lives. Tripathi (2016: 71)

This work is out to analyse the novels of Chinua Achebe from an ecofeminist perspective by comparing them with those of Thomas Hardy in order to bring out their similar and contrastive ecological visions in their quest to use literature to raise environmental consciousness. The choice of these two authors who lived and wrote at different periods and in different areas is to bring out the part the different spacio-temporal circumstances associated with them influenced their ecological orientations and equally highlight the trends that were maintained.

Considering the importance of the ecosystem to man, the problems it faces, the attempts to solve these problems and the limited success of these attempts, it is obvious that more needs to be done to check environmental crises. The problem is thus the environmental crises and the manner in which Achebe and Hardy represent it in their texts in relation to feminist perceptions. The research question that will guide the work is: how do Chinua Achebe and Thomas Hardy represent the relationship between nature and feminist dynamics in their novels?

In order to examine the ecofeminist views of Chinua Achebe and Thomas Hardy in a comparative manner, Ecocriticism is used together with its tenet Ecofeminism. Second Wave Ecocriticism as developed by Lawrence Buell is used. Unlike First Wave Ecocriticism which is biocentric, rural, individual and focuses on nature writing among others, the Second Wave relates other realities. Buell, Heise, and Thornber (2011: 419) state:

Second Wave scholarship of the past decade has shown greater interest in literatures pertaining to the metropolis and industrialization; has tended to reject the validity of the nature-culture distinction, sometimes to the point of following Bruno Latour's stigmatization of nature as hopelessly vague and antiquated; and has favored a sociocentric rather than bio-centric and/or individual-experience-oriented ethics and aesthetics, placing particular emphasis on environmental justice concerns.

Second Wave Ecocriticism is used in this way to analyse the manner in which the two writers present ecological concerns in both rural and urban settings, mindful of the fact that the texts are not wilderness novels, and to look at the environmental concerns in conjunction with feminism. In this light, Ecofeminism, a branch of Ecocriticism which is in line with Second Wave Ecocriticism is applied. The Ecofeminist thoughts exploited are those of Paul Sanders Quick (2004: 107) who

states that “[...] ecofeminism distinguishes between an androcentric viewpoint that sees women as objects for male consumption and a more ecological viewpoint that balances the masculine impulse (the self-assertive) with the feminine impulse (the integrative).” Ecofeminism is used to trace the manner in which the writers represent the link between environmental issues and the situation of the woman.

The Comparative Approach constitutes the methodology since in essence the work is comparing the ecofeminist visions of Thomas Hardy and Chinua Achebe. As far as the Comparative Approach is concerned, its “international nature” that has an “inclusion of the Other” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998:15) of Tötösy de Zepetnek will be very important in the analytical dimension of this work. Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998: 13) puts across his perspectives with regards to the Comparative Approach as he states:

The discipline of Comparative Literature is in toto a method in the study of literature in at least two ways. First, Comparative Literatures means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. [...] Comparative Literature has intrinsically a content and form, which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it has a history that substantiated this content and form.

This method is used to compare and contrast the ecofeminist views of Hardy and Achebe. The first part of the work focuses on the marginalization of nature and women, the second on the bond between the two and the last part on how women and nature are valorized.

Marginalization of Nature and the female folk

This work investigates the pertinence of gender dynamics in the environmental percepts of both Chinua Achebe and Thomas Hardy. It dwells specifically on how women and nature are represented as unimportant, instances that project the bond between women and nature and also the instances in which both women and nature are lifted to better levels. To begin with, both authors present patriarchal societies in which women and nature are relegated to the background. Achebe clearly hints on this when mentioning the yams in relation to other crops. He refers to yams as the king of crops and refers to others as women’s crops. Okonkwo’s mother and sisters work very hard “[...] but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop.” (Achebe 1958 : 16) The narrator goes on to give a vivid description of the cultivation of “the king of crops”, yams; a thing he does not do for other crops like cassava and cocoyams which are considered as women’s crops. For about three or four moons the king of crops requires hard work and constant attention from dawn to dusk. Its young tendrils are protected from earth-heat with leaves. When the rain becomes serious in its falling intensity, the women plant women’s clubs like maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds which are their main crop. Such yams are then staked, starting with little sticks and later continuing with tall and big tree branches. The women are obliged to work more in the cultivation of the king of crops as it is stated that “[...] women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late.” (Achebe 1958 : 24) Again, when Obi comes back to Nigeria, he realizes the need to do something in order to help his aging parents. Talking about his father, it is narrated that “He planted yams and his wife planted cassava and coco yams.”(Achebe 1960 : 55) By presenting yams as the king of crops and other crops with less societal, economic and cultural

importance as female crops, Achebe brings out the marginalization of women alongside some natural elements especially as the women are obliged to pay more attention to the cultivation of the king crop which belongs to and is governed by the male folk.

Nature and women are also made mockery of by Ikemefuna. He tells Nwoye and other children in Okonkwo's household that corn cob that has only a few scattered grains is called the teeth of an old woman. At hearing this, Nwoye laughs his heart out as his thoughts go immediately to Nwayieke who lived beside the udala tree. This male chauvinistic tendency develops in Nwoye to the extent that he feels most pleased when sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to perform one of the difficult and masculine tasks like splitting firewood or pounding food; though he always pretends to be angry and complain about women and their trouble whenever he is asked to do any of those things. Despite this, Okonkwo, the partrichal icon, does not think Nwoye is man enough and regrets why Ezinma had not been a boy; clearly indicating that women are inferior beings as he cannot give Ezinma much powers in his household despite her leadership qualities simply because she is not a boy. To this effect, Okonkwo rhetorically asks Obierika "Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies? If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit." (Achebe 1960 : 46) In this case, Okonkwo acknowledges that Ezinma possesses greater qualities of hardwork and leadership than Nwoye but is not the right ' sucker ' to take over from him in the future simply because she is a girl and not a boy. When Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, tries to remove the attachment to patriarchy from Okonkwo (seen through his attachment to fatherland and his frustration when on his motherland on exile) by reminding him why the name Nneka means-'Mother is Supreme.' (Achebe 1958 : 92) Okonkwo does not seem to change his views. Though he names his first child born in exile as Nneka just to please his mother's people, the name of his second child born in exile indicate his thoughts about women and nature as he names the child Nwofia which translates as "Begotten in the Wilderness." (Achebe 1958 : 115). Thus Okonkwo cherishes his fatherland very much and considers his motherland as a wilderness thereby linking women to an element of nature which he considers negative. Okonkwo is exiled because he commits "[...] a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman." (Achebe 1958 : 87) This happens in Ezeudu's funeral when Okonkwo mistakenly kills a tribesman, thereby committing female murder. The fact that it is the earth "goddess" and not god that has to be pleased by Okonkwo's seven-year exile which is meant to cleanse the land of the evil he commits points to the fact that the narrator ties the female more closely to environmental protection than men.

Thomas Hardy, on his part, equally presents incidents of patriarchy in relation to nature. When the weather is misty and the sun takes a more important dimension, Hardy says only a male pronoun can describe it suitably as he says: "The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression." (Hardy 1994 : 109) This indicates that a female pronoun is too trivial or insufficient to describe the worthy sun compared to a male pronoun. This corroborates the patriarchal tendencies in the text as brought out in the words of d'Urbervilles to Tess as he says: "[...] whatever your dear husband believed you accept, and whatever he rejected you reject, without the least inquiry or reasoning on your own part. That's just like you women. Your mind is enslaved to his." (Hardy 1994: 409)

The Female-Nature Bond

There are several instances in the visions of the two authors where women are tied down to nature much more closely than men are. In Achebe's texts, this is brought out very clearly in issues of marriage. Obierika tells Okonkwo with great disapproval that the people of Abame and Aninta do not decide bride-price like they of Unuofia do. In his words, "They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market." (Achebe 1958 : 61) In Abame and Aninta, therefore, women are reduced to the level of animals as they are bought and sold in the same way during marriage or precisely bride price negotiations and settlements. The issue of women being connected to elements of nature in marital issues does not end here. When Mgbafo goes to Okonkwo's house to lay a complaint that Obika came to his house in his village, beat him up and took his wife away, he does not fail to add that "You have taken back your sister. I did not send her away. You yourselves took her. The law of the clan is that you should return her bride-price" (Achebe 1958 : 64) When Mgbafo asks that the bride price he paid, which is yams, be returned if the wife does not come back to his house, this implies that he equates his wife to pieces of yam in worth. Similarly, Onwuzuligbo tells his in-laws who are demanding more for their daughter's hand "Leave everything to us. You know that a man's debt to his father-in-law can never be fully discharged. When we buy a goat or a cow we pay for it and it becomes our own." (Achebe 1964 : 62-63) In this metaphor again, women and animals are put in the same bracket in the context of marriage. In another dimension, when Amikwu is getting married, his bride is subjected to rituals that bring out the link between women and natural elements in marriage. Amikwu's father, Uchendu tells her to swear on a staff that she has never slept with any other man and she does; after which "Uchendu took the hen from her, slit its throat with a sharp knife and allowed some of the blood to fall on the ancestral staff." (Achebe 1964 : 93) In this case, the humiliation of women and the mistreatment of animals are collectively brought out.

On the contrary, the men are not subjected to a similar ritual in the male-dominated context. In connection to this, the first night Okuata consummates love with her husband Obika and was found to be a virgin, the narrator says she can move around the compound with her head high as her husband "[...] was even now arranging to send the goat and other presents to her mother in Umuezeani for giving him an unspoilt bride." (Achebe 1964 : 122) The goat is tied down to women and their families since in the patriarchal context men are not given such a test. The link between women and living things in matrimony is brought out with much emphasis when Akuebue's daughter, Udenkwo, leaves the husband's house because it is always her cocks that the husband takes to offer sacrifices or to entertain his visitors. The connection between women and nature could not have been put any better.

On his part, Hardy highlights the issue of the bond or oneness between the female folk and nature which men do not exhibit as he says: "A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she had somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it." (Hardy 1994 : 111) in this case, women are part and parcel of the field while men are its occupants implying that females are much more implicated in environmental issues than men are. Another instance is seen when Sue wants to get married and through the

epistolary technique pleads with Jude as her closest available married relative to give her out. She writes:

“I have been looking at the marriage service in the prayer-book, and it seems to me very humiliating that a giver-away should be required at all. According to the ceremony as there printed, my bridegroom chooses me of his own will and pleasure; but I don't choose him. Somebody GIVES me to him, like a she-ass or she-goat, or any other domestic animal. Bless your exalted views of woman, O churchman! But I forget: I am no longer privileged to tease you.--Ever, SUSANNA FLORENCE MARY BRIDEHEAD. (Hardy 1986 : 142)

Sue shows her disappointment to the fact that a man chooses her and she has no right to choose and her family member offers her to the man as if she is a domestic animal naming a she-ass or she-goat precisely. From an ecofeminist perspective, the domestication of animals without their consent and the giving out of women to husbands without a right to choose fall in the same line of the exploitation of animals and women by men. This marriage finally collapses and Jude succeeds to lure Sue into loving him, instantly securing a kiss from her. When Sue agrees and the kissing is done, Sue says: "The little bird is caught at last!" (Hardy 1986: 142), metaphorically referring to herself as a bird (prey) and to Jude as the predator. This further illustrates the connection the female have with nature from an endangerment perspective since all stand the risk of being caught by man generally and men in particular. In addition, the sale of Elizabeth Jane and Susan by Michael Henchard in Weydon-Priors takes place amidst huge ecological elements. The sale of the two women takes place when serious business is over and only minor business is going on and with reference to this minor business the narrator says “[...]the chief being the sale by auction of a few inferior animals[...]" (Hardy 1981: 3). The two women are thus sold not when important things are being sold during normal business but are auctioned just like inferior animals are auctioned when serious business is over. Animals like women are thus classified as important and less important and given similar marketing deliberations. In this context, there is an element of pathetic fallacy as nature seems to identify with and sympathize with the fate that befalls the women. As the narrator explains, they enter the place

[...] a road neither straight nor crooked, neither level nor hilly, bordered by hedges, trees, and other vegetation, which had entered the blackened-green stage of colour that the doomed leaves pass through on their way to dingy, and yellow, and red. The grassy margin of the bank, and the nearest hedgerow boughs, were powdered by the dust that had been stirred over them by hasty vehicles, the same dust as it lay on the road deadening their footfalls like a carpet; and this, with the aforesaid total absence of conversation, allowed every extraneous sound to be heard. (Hardy 1981: 2)

Ecofeminist Valorization Discourse

Achebe and Hardy also present instances in which nature and women are raised into positions of more importance. Achebe presents an image wherein women and nature are connected in the supernatural realm. When Okonkwo desecrates the land by breaking the week of peace in beating his wife, he has to be punished. It is Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, who is charged with the responsibility of punishing Okonkwo. When Okonkwo breaks the peace by being “[...]”

provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (Achebe 1958: 21), the earth goddess (female) and not earth god (male) is supposed to punish him. This indicates the fact that women and nature are united even in the supernatural realm. Okonkwo presents kola nuts to Ezeani and she says; "Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (Achebe 1958: 21) She further says that Okonkwo is not new in Umuofia and knows that it was ordained by their forefathers that before crops are planted they should respect a week of peace with neither insults nor beatings which can annoy the earth goddess who can consequently refuse to bless the planting; thereby leading to bad yields. She instructs Okonkwo thus: "You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries." (Achebe 1958: 21) Here, we see that the land is tied to Ani the earth goddess (not earth god) whose priest is a woman (not a man) by name Ezeani and she punishes Okonkwo to bring a she-goat and a hen; not a he-goat and a cock. This shows the connection between nature and the feminine in the supernatural sphere. To stretch this point further, the narrator says: "It happened during the annual ceremony which was held in honour of the earth deity. At such times the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as *egwugwu* through tiny ant-holes." (Achebe 1958: 131) Here, the interconnectedness between women, nature and the deities is brought out to reinforce the attachment between women and nature as earth is referred to as "mother" and not "father". This is not just an indication of the common fate of women and nature but also the fact that women are more inclined to protect nature than men.

Hardy equally presents situations where women take the lead role in protecting natural elements. In *Marlott*, a feminine voice keeps singing the "The Spotted Cow" part of which goes thus: "I saw her lie do'-own in yon'-der green gro'-ove; Come, love!' and I'll tell' you where!" (Hardy 1994 : 19) In this case, a female is concerned with valorizing cows and the greenery of the surrounding. Another instance is seen where Tess is very close to nature that Clare makes it one of the priorities for which he wants to marry her. Referring to Tess, "Clare had one day asked, in a laughing way, what would be the use of his marrying a fine lady, and all the while ten thousand acres of Colonial pasture to feed, and cattle to rear, and corn to reap. A farm-woman would be the only sensible kind of wife for him." (Hardy 1994: 176) Stretching the point of Tess being linked to nature further, the narrator says: "But ought she not primarily to be able to milk cows, churn good butter, make immense cheeses; know how to sit hens and turkeys and rear chickens, to direct a field of labourers in an emergency, and estimate the value of sheep and calves?" (Hardy 1994 : 209). This is indicative of the effort put in place by female characters to make nature and the environment better.

CONCLUSION

As seen above, Achebe, and, Hardy, to a lesser extent, connects ecological issues to gender concerns in their texts. They present situations in which women and nature are disregarded, those that show a strong bond between them and those in which both are valorized. This is indicative of the fact that the two authors, especially Chinua Achebe, were influenced in their ecological visions by the relationship between women and nature and corroborate the ideas of Buell, Heise and

Thornber (2011: 423) who say: “Ecofeminist discourse generally argues that the exploitation of nature and that of women are intimately linked [...]”. Therefore, both Achebe and Hardy raise concerns about the deplorable place of nature and women in their texts and present instances where women, more than men, are close to nature and take concrete steps to protect it. However, unlike Hardy, Achebe highlights the interconnectedness between nature, women and the deities which gives women protective inclinations towards nature.

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