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ROMANTIC ECOLOGISM: CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND THE FALSE ECO-CRITICISM TRIBUTES

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ABSTRACT: *Colonial and postcolonial environmental criticisms of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (TFA) have attributed to the novel eco-critical consciousness of significance, apparently ignoring the concern for environmental sustainability that is the foundation of current arts and humanities endeavour into the environmental discourses. On the strength of representations of human and non-human nature in the novel, critics have adjudged the novel to be a quintessence of the ecocritical ideal. Against some of the conceptual underpinnings of foremost ecocriticism postulations, ecological consciousness attributed to TFA are contested in this present study as false and misleading. The utilitarian values of ecocriticism and the remediating goal of literature in environmental studies, which are absent in the primary text and many of its secondary readings, are recommended as the basis for attributing ecocritical consciousness to texts. Natural entities and practices in the novel are contested as contextualization devices, employed by the author, for situating characters and events in their organic, pre-colonial African setting, and are described in this paper as the lost ecological values of Africa that are decried by contemporary critics of the global impacts of the science and technological cultures on the environment. This study employs ecocriticism as its theoretical basis.*

KEYWORDS: literature, environment, African literature, Chinua Achebe, ecocriticism, postcolonial literature,

INTRODUCTION

Arts and Humanities involvement in the environmental debate which dates back to the mid-1990s has spread from the West to the rest of the world. Sustained under the common umbrella concept known as ecocriticism, the debate has for close to two decades now influenced African literature and criticism. In Nigeria, concern for the physical environment can be seen at work as early as the 1970s in the imaginative writings from the South-Western part of the country, where the unanticipated degrading consequences of the oil prospecting activities of multinational companies were then beginning to be felt.

With the trials and execution, in the 1990s of the literary artist and activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men, for their role in agitating for the environmental rights of the Ogonis and other tribes in the country's Niger Delta region, the attention of the world was drawn to the area. Many more writers deployed the literary mode for protesting environmental injustices in the area and for creating awareness of the dangers inherent in unguarded exploitation of oil and other natural resources. Even then, interests have largely been anthropocentrically focused on the survival of human beings. Non-human elements such as fishes, fishing waters, and farmlands were only connected to the livelihood of the inhabitants of the region. Meanwhile, global impacts of the science and technology culture in other urban and rural enclaves across the country remain largely unnoticed. They were and are still largely overshadowed by socio-economic and political issues.

Denied the opportunity to develop her technologies along her indigenous knowledge and cultural practices by colonial conquest, Africa has practically depended on technologies imported at very costly prices from her erstwhile colonial overlords. This dependence has not only crippled Africa's development, but rendered her people and her natural environment and resources at the mercy of imperialist capitalist exploiters of the resources. However, African literature and criticism have for long focused primarily on decrying the consequences of socio-cultural, political and economic imperialism on the African peoples. Specific African regions, such as the solid mineral mining and the crude oil prospecting regions of the continent have felt the devastating impacts of imperialistic exploitation of her natural resources, but literature does not immediately begin to adopt the ecological viewpoints to register the pains of these regions. Over half a century (1916 – 1967)[i] active excavations for coal in Enugu, South Eastern Nigeria, tin mining in Jos[ii]; mining of gold and other precious stones in Ghana, South Africa, parts of Northern Nigeria, and other parts of Africa have all had their degrading consequences on human and non-human nature. As at 1958 when TFA was published, the British company, Shell Petroleum, was already two years into her crude oil exploitation that has reduced the Delta to the ecological mess that only became widespread from the 1990s.

From the imaginative perspective, Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973) registered glimpses of imperialistic mining projects and the degradation of the physical environment of Northern Nigerian setting of the novel. But criticisms remain silent on this aspect of the novel's concerns, preferring the socio-cultural and especially the political content of the text. Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide in their various collections of poems – *Eye of the Earth* (Osundare, 1986); *Labyrinths of the Delta, Delta Blues* and *Home Songs* (Ojaide, (1986 and 1997 respectively), have succinctly and consistently registered the degrading impacts of crude oil exploitation in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Many, deploying imaginative literature began to depict the devastations in that region. Among these are poetry collections: 'The Oil Lamp' (Ogaga Ifowodo 2005), and 'The Forbidden Tongue' (Ebi Yeibo 2007); drama: *All for Oil* (J.P. Clark 2000), *Oily Tears of the Delta* (Ibiwari Ikiriko 2000) and Tess Onwueme's *Then She said it* (2002); fiction: *Tides* (Isidore Okpewho 2003), *The Activist* (Tanure Ojaide 2006) and *Yellow-Yellow* (Kaine Agary 2006). Studies on the intersection between Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and the natural environment by various critics – Aliyu Salisu Barau (2009), Augustine Nchoujie (2009), Ferdinand Iorbie Asoo (2009), Fakrul Alam (2010), Gloria Ernest-

Samuel (2013), Gitanjali Gogoi (2014), Senayon Olaoluwa (2015), etc. – all attribute 'ecocritical' consciousness of significance to the novel.

This present study challenges the ecocritical tributes to the novel, which is representative of other pre-ecocriticism African texts that are mentioned in the passing in those earlier studies. Contestation of the earlier assumptions is against the backdrop of ecocriticism's origin in the chronicles of Anglo-American nature writing, and the distinguishing concern shown by early proponents of ecocriticism for the imbalances in the local and global ecosystems that are occasioned by the exploitative impacts of the science and technological cultures on the natural environment. These and the remediating goal of literature in environmental studies, a field that is previously outside the domain of humanistic studies, attracted the attention of African critics and then writers only at the turn of the twenty-first century, two decades plus, after such consciousness have been circulating in the occidental world. Hence, it is false and misleading to assume that ecocritical consciousness has always been constitutive of African literature. We therefore argue in this paper for the appropriateness of a romantic ecological reading of Achebe and other pre-ecocritical African texts that have significantly deployed the African natural ecosystem to create consciousness of the cultural environmental values of the indigenous persons. But it is inappropriate and deceptive to attribute ecocritical consciousness to such texts. We therefore aim to review previous ecocritical readings of the novel and analyze specific representations of human and non-human elements of the environment towards extending the ongoing debates about the place of the environment in the consciousness of African authors and critics.

THEORETICAL SOURCES

Analysis of representations of the natural environment in the novel is partially founded on William Rueckert's earliest definition of ecocriticism as 'an application of ecological concepts to the study of literature' (107), with its specific references to the poet and poetry as 'stored energy' and as 'verbal equivalent of fossil fuel' (108). This view is discountenanced as 'restrictive' compared to that proposed in *The Ecocriticism Reader* by Cheryll Glotfelty as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii) thereby boundlessly rendering every work of literature open to environmental interpretations of relationships of all sorts that are within the reader's imaginative capacity. Although Lawrence Buell's 1995 definition of the same theory as the 'study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis' (*The Environmental Imagination* 430) offers a semblance of delimitation in its 'spirit of commitment to environmental praxis', Scott Slovic's later explanation that 'there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecocritical interpretation' (160) invalidates any delimiting effort and further enlarges ecocriticism's possibilities beyond bounds. This defiance of boundaries as a deliberate effort, according to Slovic, to facilitate the application of the theory to every literary work, is further echoed in Harold Fromm's 2012 submission that writers 'were unwittingly doing ecocriticism for centuries before the genre burst forth onto the academic scene in the early 1990s' (1). This is also echoed in Timothy Clark's position that '[t]he initial impetus of modern ecocriticism … lies some two centuries in the past (13).

Hence, environment as a romantic setting is as much open to ecocritical discourse as environment as a repulsive scene of despoliation. Passive adumbration of organic essences of one ecosystem and active recrimination of devastation of other both fit into the same conceptual framework. Nonetheless, the utilitarian value of ecocriticism and the remediating goal of literature in current global environmental issues enunciated in the aforementioned works, and in virtually every ecocritical pronouncement impose some delimitation to the apparently boundless scope of the theory. Jonathan Bate's 'romantic' ecologic rationalization, recognizes that '[t]he relationship between nature and culture is the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century' and that '[a] clear and critical thinking of the problem will be crucial to humankind's future in the age of biotechnology'[iii]. Thus, literary works that are truly committed to the environmental question must be those that recognise the ecologic impact of twenty-first century mechanized and consumerist culture as a current problem that requires urgent attention. This is clearly outside the concern of many of the premodern literary works that twenty-first century African ecocritics have tagged quintessential ecocritical texts.

Making a case for 'prehistoric destruction of forests to make space for domesticated life', Timothy Clark is of the view that Bate's "Romantic ecology" reaffirms the importance of the natural world as a topic for literary criticism, but at the risk of over-idealising premodern and capitalist ways of life' (19). Anthropocentric in their concern, many of those texts, including *Things Fall Apart*, praise and encourage as much exploitation of non-human nature as human ingenuity would permit. Sometimes referred to as '*ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism, and green studies*', especially in European English discourses, ecocriticism, in its ecological connotation, takes into view the intersections 'between human culture and the physical world' (Glotfelty xx), but especially regarding the impact of the former on the latter, and calls for action more than rhetoric. William Howarth's description of an ecocritic as 'a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action' (69) further illustrate the practical value of the theory. This leaves no room for exaltation of nature, as such belongs to the romantic past.

When William Rueckert posits that ecocriticism transgresses disciplinary boundaries to engage ecosystem degradation as 'a substantive, biosphere-wide reality we must confront and attempt to do something about' (116), he clearly advocates ecocriticism beyond its romantic essences. As a reservoir of creative energy, the poet is to ply him/herself beyond words and practically work towards salvaging the environment from its present degradation and the degradation of the human self. This sense of a practical approach, a conduct (as in action, or behaviour) towards salvaging the physical environment is lacking in most pre-ecocriticism texts.

ECO-CRITICISM OF TRADITIONAL TEXTS

Simon Estok and Leah Marcus' readings of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, respectively, provide parallel insights to an ecocritical estimation of TFA. Estok's argument that 'while thematic discussions of nature in contemporary American environmental writers may very well be new (many of the writers themselves being new!)

it's old hat for Shakespeare' (16), has its corollary in the ecocritical positions by readers of TFA as an embodiment of ecological wisdom. By implying that traditional authors possess as much ecocritical consciousness as contemporary environmental writers, the basic concerns over contemporary environmental crises are watered down to the level of school debates that are only meant to test speakers' expressive power. Conferring eco-critical merit on premodern texts is similar to the problem of putting a new wine into an old wine skin. It is difficult to see how an appreciation of the natural world of Shakespeare's creation can advance the lot of twenty-first century environment that originally informs ecocriticism. Similarly, Marcus' classification of Milton's Eve 'as a proto-ecologist and Milton himself … a precursor of modern environmentalism' (100) underscores desperation for readers' ecocritical conscious voices to be heard in whatsoever way possible. Marcus, by using the terms 'ecocritical views **of** Milton' (100), and claiming that by plucking the forbidden fruit, Milton's Eve commits a physical wound on earth she weakens ecocriticism's basic assumptions.

Yet, these idealistic views of traditional texts may have been informed by the position that 'It makes sense that the reach of "ecocriticism" … should extend from the oldest surviving texts to works of the present moment' (Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, 3). It may also have been informed by a patriotic zeal to advance literatures of one's own nation into the new theory. Either way, it tends to diminish ecocriticism's original goal. Buell's position could be understood to apply to futuristic texts that actually anticipated current global ecological imbalances and their consequences. Let us from a patriotic zeal assume like Senayon Olaoluwa that 'ecocritical consciousness has always been constitutive of African literature' ('There was a Time', 126). It does appear that with such a postulation there is an end to the problem; hence, nothing more to talk about. What else is there to talk about? Africans, from inception have always been knowledgeable about, and interested in literary environmental praxis. Q*uod erat demonstrandum*; end of the argument! We keep recycling words and ideas to support this position. But can it really be the case that ecocritically speaking African literature has come of age? The contrary is the case, with the belief by some Africans, as cited by Slaymaker, that whites 'have more time, energy, and wealth for appreciating and aestheticizing nature and environment that is not tied to their daily subsistence [therefore] whites should mount a global campaign to preserve what gives them pleasure' (684).

Major African cities, towns and rural enclaves are desperately writhing under deplorable environmental issues of pollution, flooding, desertification, overgrazing, soil erosion, poor management of industrial and domestic wastes, unwholesome exploitation of natural resources, and indiscriminate dumping of refuse by individuals. These not only demonstrate lack of interest in what becomes of the natural world but makes nonsense of all claims of ecological consciousness having always been with us from inception. Yet, with each successive ecocritical reader tracing every natural element in an African text, and attributing ecological consciousness to author/text, there appears to be little or no need for attaining ecocriticism's remedying goals. Like the saying, if you say you have no fault when you do, your fault remains with you. But if you accept your faults and seek to overcome them, then you will indeed become fine.

Thus, even though leading proponents of ecocriticism have clearly decided it was better to leave the theory as open as literature itself, the utilitarian values of ecocriticism and the remediating goal of literature in environmental scholarship, as the primary focus of ecocriticism, imposes some limitation. William Howarth's view of the ecocritic as 'a house judge', confronted with the tasks of judging 'the merits and faults of writings that depict nature', 'celebrating nature' in texts, informs this reassessment of the novel. From the omniscient narrator's perspectives and the perspectives of relevant characters, selected events, actions and scenes, it is possible to understand the connection between the novel and the physical environment and to discover the environmental merits/demerits of the novel. Reader-response concepts by Stanly Fish, Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser have guided our understanding of the sentiments and perceptions of the environment that have produced an ecocritical 'interpretive community', the transaction between the reader and the text that have produced ecological meanings from readers' subjective experiences of the eco-theory and Achebe's writing. The positions by Aliyu Salisu Barau, Gitanjali Gogoi, Fakrul Alam, Senayon Olaoluwa, Gloria Ernest-Samuel, Augustine Nchoujie, Iorbie Asoo, etc. inform this rereading.

POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM

From the African perspective, William Slaymaker's 'Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses', first published in 2001, perhaps ushered the ecocriticism theory into the annals of African literature and criticism. Following his successes, especially with the reprint of the paper in the 2007 *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, many African critics found ecocriticism a significant enough approach to studying African literature. Thus, the destructive impacts of crude oil exploitation on the physical Niger Delta environment and on the people of the region, depicted in these and similar works across Africa subsequently become the bases for ecocritical analysis of imaginative writings in academic papers and conferences.

Ecocritical essays by Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Rob Nixon and Anthony Vital, among others launched postcolonial African dimension to the theory. Characterized by sensibilities either of endorsement or rebuttal of Slaymaker's position, African ecocriticism has also gained many unique protest idioms such as 'environmentalism of the poor', 'ecological imperialism', 'resistance ecology'; 'ecological militancy', etc. deployed by Nixon, Uzoechi Nwagbara, and Sule Egya respectively, to reflect some salient postcolonial perspectives to the theory. Moving ecocriticism slightly away from its Western biocentric parameter and incorporating socio-economic and political eco-activist tempo into the theory, Nixon's 'Slow Violence and environmentalism of the poor' has been favoured by some African critics for underscoring the intersection between Africa's poor socio-economic conditions and the physical environment. Environmentalism of the poor, perceived as challenging 'resource imperialism inflicted on the global South to maintain the unsustainable consumer appetites of rich-country citizens and, increasingly, of the urban middle classes of the global South itself' (Nixon 22), clearly overlooks the contributions of Africa's lower class people to their ecological woes, their greed and envy of the upper class people that have driven them to abandon their lands and the natural ways of their historical forebears for the false promises of urban life. The argument by Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myer that 'Africans are not the

primary sources of [their environmental] problems, nor do many Africans generally benefit from resource exploitation that engenders them' (9) equally excuses the fact that Africans are probably the greatest consumers of the end-products of the exploited resources of Africa – importing virtually everything from the capitalist West – even those that could be produced locally, thereby encouraging their own exploitation and degradation.

With the example of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, where crude oil exploration has led to increasing degradation of land, water, air, as well as the human and non-human species, ecocriticism has found voices in attacking what Uzoechi Nwagbara perpetually tags 'ecological imperialism'[iv], so that 'poetics of resistance[v] issuing from the region notwithstanding, anthropocentric strictures continue to dominate environmental discourses of the area.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin explain that postcolonial ecocriticism 'draws attention to the social and political usefulness of [a text], its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world' (14); it is 'broadly *eco-socialist* in inspiration' (15), and has as its goal 'to contest western ideologies of development, but without necessarily dismissing the idea of 'development'' (19). Thus, with ecocritical zeal of the nature tied to the fight against western ideological imperialism, and with the environment only at the fringes, it is obvious that the survival of the non-human other in the African ecosystem is secondary and far from being accorded importance.

For a continent like Africa that is clearly on the receiving end of much of global environmental problems, whether orchestrated by the West or by African themselves, many of the verbal latitude to ecological issues offered by Western ecocriticism are apparently not helpful to the grossly underdeveloped African continent. The call for environmental justice in the Niger and other exploited regions of Africa notwithstanding environmentalism in African literature is still far from having arrived. Pertinent social environmental issues are still largely being ignored, either on the assumption that Africa has always been conscious of the environment or in utter ignorance of the attitudes of persons outside the academia, to the physical environment, where diverse African texts, including those with little or no inclination towards the environment and its troubles, have been outrageously read with claims of ecocritical consciousness having always been constitutive of African literature. This is all thanks to the seemingly lack of boundary in the ecocritical propositions, which Africa and the rest of the world have inherited from the West.

SOME FALSE ECOCRITICAL TRIBUTES

Salisu Barau appreciates representations of the 'beauty and wonders' of nature; 'Mystery and Fear of Nature'; resources from the environment – palm oil, palm wine, cola nut, cowries and bamboo – mentioned in the course of the narrative of social and domestic events in the novel and concludes, from his ecocritical perspective, that TFA is an ecocritical archetype. He cites heavy rain and dry season when, 'the earth burnt like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown' (Barau 97 – 9) as further evidences of the novel's ecocritical merits, taking the hyperbolic essence of that last clause out of context. He cites 'the week of peace', when no work is done by the people, the levy on a

man 'whose cow was let loose on his neighbour's crops', punishment for accidental killing of the royal python (a sacred animal in the people's supernatural worldview), and punishment for manslaughter, as instances of what he terms 'environmental law and policy' in the novel, (Barau 101 – 102) and concludes that the novel is 'a quintessential prose that has made a breakthrough in the budding field of ecocriticism' (Barau, 103). Barau cites Okonkwo's battering of his wife over a few banana leaves she takes off the tree for some domestic use as punishment for her injury and the cry: 'Who killed this banana tree?' (qtd. in Barau 102) as a sign of Okonkwo's concern for the non-human other. But here is the actual context of that incident:

> Okonkwo could never become as enthusiastic over feasts as most people… he was always uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast … He would be happier working on his farm …then the storm burst. Okonkwo, who had been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly found an outlet.
>
> > 'who killed this banana tree?'
> > A hush fell on the compound immediately.
> > 'Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb?
>
> 'As a matter of fact' says the narrator,
> 'the tree is very much alive. Okonkwo's second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping … His anger thus satisfied, Okonkwo decided to go out hunting' (TFA 30 – 31).

Barau's ecocritical estimation of Okonkwo's reaction is deflated by the above context from which Okonkwo's anger derives. Thus, we argue that scenes and incidents, descriptive of life in a pre-industrialisation era, are neither critical of the environment nor instructive towards conservation of life other than those of human beings. Anthropocentric in all its ramifications, Barau's endeavours, clearly affirms his subjective experience of the twenty-first century perception of the environment in literature. By making 'ecological criticism' a major idea in the novel, he transforms the text into his 'private world, a place where [he] works out (through the ego) his … fantasies' (Bressler, 68), romanticizing the African ecosystem of the novel to fit into his twenty-first century ecocritical thoughts. His interpretation of Okonkwo's battering of his wife as punishment for her injury to the banana tree is an issue for ecofeminism. But the context does not apply to ecocriticism's ecological empathy. But let us examine another ecocritical response to TFA. From a patriotic zeal, Olaoluwa argues that:

> from its inception, modern African literature has evolved a unique template for ecocritical articulation, a template informed by a unique history of environmental depredation. The immanence of ecocritical consciousness in African literature can be shown to be at work as early as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where ecological depletion begins with the occupation and clearing of the evil forest for the building of church by Western missionaries. ('There was a Time', 126)

He contends that 'By declaring a week sacred, the Umuofia community forbids noise or disharmony of any kind … and it is in this very sense that the epistemic wisdom of Umuofia displays a sophisticated form of environmental awareness' (202). However, the agricultural and religious context of that tradition does not support any of ecocriticism's core concepts. The annual one-week of peace is an agrarian religious observance y the people of Umuofia. Ezeani, the earth priest, states clearly the anthropocentric interest of that practice: 'We live in peace with our fellows [fellow human beings] to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow' (TFA 24). Besides, Okonkwo's disruption of the peace week, his irrational defiance of the gods/goddesses, Umuofia's metaphysical essences, and the punishment meted to him is a parable on consequences irrational behaviour. The priest of the earth goddess whose rule Okonkwo violates drives home this point more succinctly.

> 'Listen to me', he said when Okonkwo had spoken. 'You are not a stranger in Umuofia. 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 neighbour … to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow (24)

That Okonkwo in his zeal to satisfy his ego defies the transcendent beings and that nature other than man is not implicated in the narrative setting of the event are enough indications that the week of peace is not observed to mitigate noise pollution as suggested by Olaoluwa. It is at best spiritual or socio-economic, as the setting itself is devoid of such pollutions that are only known in high-tech urban enclaves that the critic is no doubt familiar with. Like Olaoluwa, Augustine Nchoujie, praises Achebe 'for being futuristic, living' as he says, '50 years ahead of his time, a time that was to be characterised by abrupt climate change and a cry for man and literature to save the environment'(118). Contrarily to his view, we argue that if every literary text should in this sense be categorized as eco-critical, it would be utterly impossible to grasp the real essence of the current outcry against the harmful impacts of science and the technological cultures on nature and its organisms, biotic and abiotic.

Gitanjali Gogoi's position that 'Though Achebe has not shown any apparent awareness towards ecological crisis his novels … bear sufficient proofs of the writer's addressing the theme of nature and environment' (1), is equally devoid of proofs of concern for nature other than humans. Nature and environment as backdrop of the novels are devoid of any of the ideologies of environmental writings of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That 'Achebe shows how the language of the Igbos was shaped by the landscape [and that] frequent references to flora and fauna implies the Igbos' closeness to nature (3)' are no proofs of consciousness of the environmental hazards that inform current literature's endeavour into the realm of ecological science.

While, we strongly concur with Fakrul Alam's suggestion that 'Achebe was writing the novel in part to make his African readers aware of the extent of the embeddedness of their forefathers in the environment' (n.p), it is difficult to see how this relates to consciousness of current global ecological crises and the concern for their remediation. If we accept Alam's citation of Greg Gerrad that every written work that captures the 'nexus between the lived life of a community and its rituals, between the human and the inhuman, between

nature and culture' (Gerrad qtd. in Alam, n.p), is enough basis for ecological consciousness; then the environmental issues of degradation and mitigation would be undercut and defeated in our consciousness.

Iorbee Asoo's eco-consciousness appeal to 'natural phenomenon such as trees, rivers, mountains, forests and animal life …' (65) in TFA as evidence of ecological consciousness is equally difficult to accept. The natural elements have always been around and every true literature has always striven to capture their essences. But does this make their presence in texts ecological in intent? No.

NATURE IN *THINGS FALL APART*

From characters and the narrative perspective, non-human nature forms an integral part of the story. The natural environment provides the backdrop of the story as already testified in the foregoing review of literature. From the narrator's point of view, a little more insight from the relationship of the human and the non-human elements within the natural setting are relevant towards establishing the main argument of this paper.

Unoka is a major character in the story. He could be described as a natural person. As a member of a musical band, he sings, plays on the flute, and in his hedonistic disposition enjoys nature's bounties:

> He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes … Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either because the harmattan wind was blowing down from the north. Some years the harmattan was very severe and a dense haze hung on the atmosphere. Old men and children would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one, he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any length of cloth. (4)

This romantic setting possesses no evidence of either urban consumerist appropriation of nature or an exploitation of rural nature to warrant any eco-critical attention; there is no evidence of a commodification of nature, or of ecological depredation that is at the heart of ecocriticism. Unoka symbolizes nature in its romantic essences, devoid of moralities, emotions or anxieties. His love of, and response to nature and the natural elements, his love of 'the first kites that returned with the dry season' exemplify the inert romanticism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unoka, in spite of his romantic inclinations, is despised for the ineffectiveness of his attempts at exploiting nature for his benefit. The priestess of the earth goddess rebukes him:

> You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchet and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man. (14)

Clearly, from the omniscient narrator's viewpoint, the priestess is without any presentiment of future damage to the ecosystem of the yet rudimentary technologies: hoes, axes and machetes. To 'work like a man' is to exploit non-human nature for the benefit of the human populace. But neither Unoka nor the priestess cast for the exploitative role. They are with nature and harmless at the moment. Unoka's skills as a singer, dancer, and general music-maker go unrewarded beyond the immediate feasting that accompanies their music-making. Unoka lives and dies miserably poor, as the narrative voice recounts:

> Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi* or a personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the evil forest and left there to die. There was a man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first or the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute. (14)

Achebe chose to represent in 1958 an age when human beings were at the mercy of nature. Common diseases like swellings in one's limbs are superstitiously termed evil and the afflicted abandoned to die without any therapeutic effort. From a non-fictional account, Mayo Clinic's online medical diagnoses identifies swelling of the stomach or feet as a medical disorder known as edema, which results from 'excess fluid trapped in [one's] body's tissues'.Edema can be the result of medication, pregnancy or an underlying disease — often congestive heart failure, kidney disease or cirrhosis of the liver. Taking medication to remove excess fluid and reducing the amount of salt in your food often relieves edema. When edema is a sign of an underlying disease, the disease itself requires separate treatment.[vi].

Concerned only with exposing many of the pre-historic persons' ignorance of knowledge taken for granted by the contemporary reader, there is a conspiracy in the narrator's to leave the characters in their state of ignorance. The earth goddess makes her pronouncements, either in ignorance, or out of malice. The tone, a clear mockery of the interpretation given to the sickness by the earth goddess, through the same priestess, who rebukes Unoka for his failures, makes the conspiracy much more vivid. However, the representation is of little or no ecocritical consequence, as it does not address any of the current local or global ecological issues.

Okonkwo, the central figure in the story, stands the best chance to convey to the reader environmental consciousness of any significance if the author so desired. But this is not the case. Unlike Unoka, Okonkwo is incapable of appreciating beauty in nature or any of the elements around him. He is described by the narrator as:

> a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his Father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head. (9)

The heroic representation of the chief character renders him antagonistic to nature. Okonkwo is said to have 'had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father' (3). He ruthlessly attacks nature that is beyond his comprehension and descends with fury on those around him to whom nature appears to be less benevolent. Thus, Okonkwo:

> ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wife, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children … his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father … And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (11)

Okonkwo hates nature itself. Like all persons considered successful, he owes his successes to his ability to appropriate nature's free gift: farmlands, forests, other human beings, and anything that was necessary to accumulating material wealth and fame. Okonkwo's obsession with success is akin to the twenty-first century commodification of nature's resources by its greedy exploiters. Unoka and Nwoye, on the other hand, symbolize the naturalist essence that the machine in Okonkwo and select warriors of Umuofia represent.

Still antithetical to Okonkwo's character is his friend Obierika. Michael Stultz, like several readers of TFA, recognises that Obierika, naturally, 'is reflective: he is critical of culture, and he adapts to and anticipates cultural change'[vii] He like the rest of the characters, lives subject to nature's whims and caprices, but is redeemed by his ability to sometimes stop and ponder: 'I don't know how we got that law' (TFA 55), an indication of his willingness to adapt to cultural changes, a progressive thought that makes way for colonial infiltration of the African cultural landscape with the dualistic culture of the West, to separates human beings from their non-human counterparts and from nature. These, probably the historic origin of 'our [African] ecologic crisis'[viii], predates ecocriticism and its concern over the cultural influence upon ecosystem equilibrium.

This reappraisal of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an extension of the ongoing debates about the connection between literature and the environment. It makes an additional contribution to the already existing views on the African perspective to literature and the environment, and to the global Humanities' engagement with the nature/culture dichotomy and its impact on local and global ecosystems. The paper is call for a more realistic approach to the estimation of the overall environmental consciousness of Africans. It enlarges the African ecocritical vistas and creates possibilities for further debates of Africa's environmental issues through literature, with the choice of celebrating nature's quixotic essences or berating her despoilers, probably a major line of demarcation between romanticism and ecocriticism presented for future endeavours. One favours a nostalgic replication of the preindustrialisation cultures, while the other takes an activist stance towards the preservation of human and non-human nature alike, amidst the advancements in the science and technological cultures. The foundation of the various perspectives of ecocriticism explored in this paper, however, is the one consciousness, the understanding, according to Glotfelty, that 'most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems' (xx).

CONCLUSION

This study, which began on the assumption that natural elements in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are contextualization devices that bear little relevance to twenty-first century eco-critical values, concludes with the submissions that the relationship between the novel and the physical environment is an idealistic one, in which ecological consciousness is imposed on the author and his novel by twenty-first century environmental conscious readers. The study discovers also that earlier eco-critical credits of the novel have been influenced by ecocriticism's boundless classification by its foremost American and English proponents. This position, which clearly permits various possibilities of eco-critical interpretations of literary expressions notwithstanding the absence of practical environmentalism in such texts, we argue, creates a false sense of ecological consciousness. Regarding present-day Africa, such false values slacken the pace of eco-consciousness development beyond academic flag-waving, and the exploitation of nature in texts for academic gains, at the expense of the utilitarian goals of changing the material world through literature. Even though leading proponents of ecocriticism have clearly decided it was better to leave the theory as open as literature itself, the utilitarian values of ecocriticism and the remediating goal of literature in environmental scholarship, as the primary focus of ecocriticism, imposes some delimitation.

Beyond the undue credit of eco-consciousness and agitations for justice in a place like Nigeria's Niger Delta region, writers could take 'righteous' stands to defend the ruined urban enclaves of many African countries where agrarian lives have been abandoned for synthetic lifestyles that are detrimental to environmental sustainability. Rather than eulogise representations of pre-colonial African ecosystem in texts as quintessence of ecocriticism, the texts could be interpreted, in the Negritudian fashion as representatives of the core essences of Africa's ecological values that ecocriticism could help to reclaim.

Such values as purity of the ecosystem, sustainability through animal and crop farming, or forest conservation could be reclaimed through objectively focusing attention, not on the environment as it used to be, but on the environment as it presently is. Story or characters that are committed to reinventing the ecological values of Africa to withstand the current technological culture, though lacking in those good old texts, could evolve through the narrative, what the narrator tells the reader, or through the actions of characters towards the environment as we have in eco-critical texts. Thus we could always ask ourselves a few pertinent questions about the environment and be able to find answers to them from a text:

- What conservation values are represented in this text?
- How do characters' actions help to preserve the human and non-human species?
- Does the narrator's (a character's speech/words in a play or tone of the poet persona in a poem) tone convey a concern for the environment?
- Are there characters in the story who are committed, in words/actions, or both, to fighting the cause of nature?
- Are there environmentally harmful practices in the texts?
- Is there a character whose actions or words are directed towards changing such practices?

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[iv] 'Art of Resistance: negation, Ojaide and the remaking of the Niger delta', *African Identities*, Vol. 10, no 1, pp. 77 – 93, 2012.

[v] This is the title of a two thousand ecocritical reading of Ojaide's poems by Nwagbara, in which Nwagbara and ten succinctly established the socio-political and economic content of the resistance, though tied to the Niger Delta environment as the backdrop.

[vi] With all the symptoms outlined in that 2020 discovery by the medical staff of Mayo Clinic, it is difficult for anyone living in this age to understand why a victim of such a disease should be left to die in a forest.

[vii] Michael Stultz, an expert educator answers an online question 'why is Obierika a foil?'

[viii] Lynn White, Jr.'s 'Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' has inspired many ecocritical positions from the West and beyond.