

**AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF JOSEPH  
CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND CHINUA  
ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART***

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**Abstract**

Ecofeminism is a subgenre of ecocriticism that came into existence within the second wave of ecocriticism. Scholars such as Karen J. Warren and Greta Gaard have advocated that the women's cause cannot be held apart from the cause of the natural environment and have therefore emphasized the necessity of ecofeminism. To that end, ecofeminists maintain that the oppression of women and the environment are interconnected. This article aims to analyze Joseph Conrad's renowned novella, *Heart of Darkness* and the African author Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* from an ecofeminist perspective. Both of these are works of fiction set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the African continent. However, despite a similar setting, both works reflect the British colonization of the African territories through different viewpoints. *Heart of Darkness* presents its story from the perspective of the Western colonisers, whereas *Things Fall Apart* reflects this period through the window of the colonized African people. Nevertheless, both narratives expose a serious oppression of women and the environment. The study will expose these oppressions with specific references to both texts. The article's final aim will be to point out that the freedom of women and the environment are intertwined and that one cannot achieve complete emancipation without establishing the liberation of the other.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Ecofeminism

**INTRODUCTION**

Joseph Conrad is one of the most acclaimed British writers in the English language. Originally from Polish origin, he was born in Poland which was under the rule of Russia in 1857. Conrad, then left Poland for France to attend a career as a merchant marine which explains his devotion for the sea in his upcoming literary works. His famous novella *Heart of Darkness* was mostly inspired from his three years of service at the Belgian Trading Company.

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*Heart of Darkness* is a canonical work which conveys the implementation of Western colonialism in Africa. The novella tells Marlow's quest through Belgian Congo. *Heart of Darkness* is derived from Conrad's adventures in Africa and Belgian Congo in specific. It provides a general insight on western colonialism in the African continent. It also has an important place in postcolonial, British literature.

Chinua Achebe was a writer, critic and full-time scholar from Nigeria. He was generally referred to as "the father of African novel". *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was the first book he had written. It is also known to be the most read book in the entire African continent. The Nigerian author chose to write his books in English; "the language of the colonisers" and supported the use of English in African literature. In 1975, he gave the lecture: "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Heart of Darkness*" where he blamed Conrad and his novella to possess several racist characteristics. His lecture caused great dispute in the West as many scholars and critics began to discuss the issue of racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are two opposing novels due to the fact that Conrad portrays African colonialism from the Eurocentric, coloniser perspective whereas Achebe tells a similar story from an African, colonised perspective. Hence, both works are worth comparing. The aim of this study is to compare and contrast both canonical works from an ecofeminist point of view. This theory examines the relationship between women's issues and ecological matters in literary works.

The term ecofeminism came to existence during the feminist movement of the 1970s and was derived from Françoise d'Eaubonne's concept, "écoféminisme" (Howell, 1997: 231). In this work, d'Eaubonne accused the patriarchal order and male domination for the systematic abuse of natural areas (231). Pioneer of ecofeminist theory, Rosemary Radford Ruether describes ecofeminism as:

The union of the radical ecology movement, or what has been called 'deep ecology', and feminism. [...] It examines how these natural communities function to sustain a healthy web of life and how they become disrupted, causing death to the plant and animal life. Human intervention is obviously one of the main causes of such disruption. Thus ecology emerged as a combined socio-economic and biological study to examine how human use of nature is causing pollution of soil, air and water, and destruction of the natural system of plants and animals, threatening the base of life on which the human community itself depends. (1995: 35)

Hence, ecofeminism represents a unification of radical ecology and the movement of feminism. In addition, the ultimate cause of this human intervention lies in the roots of the patriarchal system. According to ecofeminists, patriarchy and its institutions are responsible for all oppressive behaviour directed towards women and natural areas around the world. Ruether maintains two spheres of which the association between the domination of women and nature are established: the cultural symbolic sphere and the socio-economic sphere (1995: 36). Another prominent ecofeminist, Jane Birkeland emphasises the role of politics: "ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement and a practice but it also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (1993: 18). Thereby, Birkeland attributes responsibility for the degradation of the environment to the male centered mentality which has been dominant in the society. Another ecofeminist scholar, Carol J. Adams defines the notion as:

The issues of sexism, classism, racism and heterosexism that concern feminism, ecofeminism adds naturism- the oppression of the rest of nature. It argues that the connection between the oppression of women and nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions. (1993: 1)

Adams highlights that a variety of problems that persist in the society are closely interwoven and maintains that all forms of oppression that includes class, sex, gender, race and that of nature stems from the same oppressor. Thus, in order to provide a solution, this interrelated oppression needs to be acknowledged.

One ecofeminist who published pivotal research to influence ecofeminist theory is Karen J. Warren. Warren argues that patriarchy's oppressive spirit towards women and nature are equivalent and that women are involved in patriarchy's cycle of oppression (Glazebrook, 2002: 14). Warren also puts forward that the relation between feminism and ecology is deeper than thought: "historical (typically causal), conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, and ethical" (2000: 21). Therefore, Warren asserts that feminists and environmentalists ought to come together around a common cause (Glazebrook, 2002: 15). In her pivotal work, *The Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Warren points out that:

Adequate analysis and resolution of such environmental issues as deforestation, water pollution, farming and food production, and toxins and hazardous waste location must be integrally connected to an understanding of the plight and status of women, people of color, the poor, and children ... [to help] one understand how mainstream environmental practices and policies often reflect, reinforce, or create practices and policies that devalue, subvert, or make invisible the actual needs and contributions of women, people of color, the underclass, and children. (2000: xiv-xv)

Thus, Warren stresses that it is imperative for all oppressed entities such as minorities, the children, the workers, the disadvantaged to be associated with the conditions of women. As all of these entities are oppressed by the same belligerent, it is of great significance that all of these should be considered together as parts of a whole. Warren's greatest purpose is to comprehend all correlations between these forms of oppression (isms) that continues to exist in the society (Glazebrook, 2002: 15). Moreover, Warren goes on to assert that ecological disruptions directly affect women, especially in third world countries as they are the basic providers of the household (2002: 17). As a result, she emphasises that: "patriarchal institutions of reason, technoscience, and capital devalue women's sustainable practice" (2002: 17). Hence: "women are one of the first groups that are negatively affected by patriarchal institutions and their extensions" (2002:18-19). Warren proposes a new theory of social justice that will promote equality (18-19). As a result, Warren's work has maintained an infrastructure of empirical data that proves the interrelated nature between the oppression of women and the destruction of the natural environment.

Thus, the ecofeminist perspective is not only challenging the established norms of western society but also maintaining a new and equitable foundation that is inspiring and promising. One of ecocriticism's best characteristics is that it does not only take the rights of women and nature into consideration, but those of all oppressed people and non-human entities. In that sense, ecocriticism is a holistic theory which is concerned with the plight of all subjugated people.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, was not meant for women readers as women are completely left out in the story. Thus, it could be a little disturbing for female readers to

read such a work. Women are completely ignored in Conrad's canonical novella, they are non-existent and insignificant. It is commonly agreed that Joseph Conrad's fiction is predominantly male-centred. His works which mainly deal with colonial adventures, perilous sea voyages and major quests of explorations usually concern men rather than women who are mere vague and superficial identities. There are a total of three female characters in *Heart of Darkness*: the intended of Mr. Kurtz, the mistress of Mr. Kurtz and Marlow's aunt. They all embody inferior, submissive and weak characteristics. At the beginning of the novella, Marlow says:

His transformative journey, Marlowe notes, It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (Conrad, 1999: 27)

This quote openly reveals the isolation of women in the 19th century. Not only have they been isolated but also pacified and confined to an idle position. They are considered mere subjects in possession and at service of their male masters. Men seem to be keen on controlling and keeping women submissive in the novella. Though women are pushed back to the background of the story, their silent presence is felt throughout the novella. Johanna M. Smith argues that:

A story about manly adventure narrated and written by a man, *Heart of Darkness* might seem an unpropitious subject for feminist criticism . . . however, a feminist approach to Conrad's story of colonizing can interrogate its complex interrelation of patriarchal and imperialist ideologies. By examining the women in Marlow's narrative, we can identify the patriarchal imperialist blend that requires the kinds of women he creates. (1989: 180)

Of all the women in *Heart of Darkness*, there is only one who seems to be powerful: Marlow's very own aunt who helps him get the job:

Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It's a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with, etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy. (Conrad, 1999: 12)

Nevertheless, her aunt's strength is rather shallow because her influence's origin again lies in influential men whom she knows by means of a close friend. Colonialism and patriarchy go hand in hand and this is not exactly surprising because notions such as imperialism, oppression, war, death, exploitation, pollution, destruction of nature are always associated with patriarchy in general and men in specific. Women, on the contrary are associated with the exact opposite: peace, liberation, life and the revival of nature. As ecofeminist theory suggests, there exists a strong relation between nature and women as both are considered givers of life. This connection is clearly visible in Conrad's novella.

The Colonisers have one sole purpose of coming to the Congo: robbing the land of ivory and other precious goods. When the colonisers arrive in Congo, it suddenly becomes 'Belgian Congo' as the Belgians claim this gigantic piece of land in the name of their King. What the Western colonisers actually colonise is African nature along with all her inhabitants. In the novella, the wilderness is described with words of negative connotation such as: dark, wild, gloomy, savage, barbarous, etc.

For the colonisers, the natives and their land are beyond comprehension. Their one and only intention is to possess and exploit the land and this possession of the land is homogenous with the possession of the women. The white, male colonisers see the dark wilderness of Congo as an asset to be conquered similar to the women they have conquered and imprisoned (K. Smith, 2009: 3). They seek to dominate and rule women simultaneously with the land. Clearly, they have no respect for that which they don't seem to understand and relate nature to savagery: "I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (Conrad, 1999: 79).

There are many lines in the novella where women and nature are associated together. The intended of Mr. Kurtz is associated with European civilisation, whereas the African tribal women are affiliated with darkness and primitivism:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (1999: 87)

As a result, it can be concluded that in *Heart of Darkness*, nature and women's subordination are equivalent and parallel issues. The novella openly demonstrates that colonialism exploits women as much as it exploits natural areas.

Nigerian author Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in English in 1958. Okonkwo, the leader of a local tribe is married to three wives and has a total of eight children. He is a fearless warrior and a skilled wrestler. Throughout the novel, he is portrayed as an ambitious man obsessed with the idea of preserving and continuing his family's pride and authority. According to Igbo traditions the power of a man is measured by his wealth and the number of his wives. The story is divided into two main parts: life of the Igbo tribe before and after the arrival of British colonisers.

The first part recounts the natives' lives within their tribal community. Okonkwo is ashamed of his father's 'feminine' legacy and therefore is obsessed with proving his masculinity. A boy by the name of Ikemefuna is handed over to Okonkwo and his house but shortly, the Oracle proclaims that he must be killed. In order not to look weak, Okonkwo slaughters the boy with his own hands. Despite feeling deep guilt, his misfortune continues as he accidentally shoots and kills Ezeudu's (eldest of the village) son. As punishment for that, he and his family are sent to exile for seven years for violating their tribal religious code.

While in exile, Okonkwo finds out that white men have arrived in Umuofia and have started converting tribesmen into Christianity. After returning from exile, Okonkwo feels disturbed by the growing presence of white, Christian missionaries and the local government they

have formed in their absence. He reacts by burning down a local church and gets caught by the forces of the so-called government. He gets released in exchange of ransom but also gets humiliated by the white men and beheads one of their messengers. Eventually, he attempts to organise a rebellion among the natives. However, Okonkwo gets disillusioned by the native's passive response to his call for uprising and finally hangs himself in order to avoid prosecution by the white men.

The Igbo tribe is strictly bound to customs and tradition. The natives have a deep respect for nature and live off the land by harvesting yam. The tribe is very sensitive not to offend nature as she is regarded to be sacred:

For the Igbos, nature was divine. Trees, rivers, hills, cave, and different other components of the environment held divine powers. Ani was the goddess of earth and fertility, Amadiora, the god of thunder, Ufiojioku, the god of harvest and Anyanwu was the sun god. Igbos believed that the divine nature influenced human life from birth till death and even after that; any violation of the natural setting meant to disrupt the flow of life. (Gogoi, 2014: 3)

The Igbo tribe's natives live in perfect harmony with nature until the white men arrive to spoil it. White Christians not only disrupt their communal lifestyle but also shake up their belief in the nature deities by forcing to convert them to the one and only Christian God. Okonkwo's committing suicide by hanging himself is seen as treason by the natives as it is strictly against their faith. In result, he does not deserve a proper burial due to this unnatural death. This is reflected in the following quote: "it is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen" (Achebe, 1994: 186).

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel that has been severely criticised by feminist critics for being discriminative and offensive against women. To a certain extent, this is true. The Igbo tribe possess a highly patriarchal culture where men are in control of everything. Women stay in the background and are sometimes victims of mistreatment which is often described in the novel: "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" (Achebe, 1994: 12).

The Igbo men can marry multiple women (up to nine or ten) as this is the usual way of the community. The wealthier and more influential a man is, the more wives he has. Since women are regarded as assets and do not possess rights, they are simply referred to with their number: the first wife, second wife, etc. First wives are granted more respect than the latter ones. Possessing women was a sign of wealth like the possession of other assets.

Okonkwo is a man filled with obsession of demonstrating his manliness. He is willing to do anything, at any cost to prove that, unlike his father, he is a masculine and powerful man. He kills two of the tribe's children for nothing and excessive obsession with masculinity eventually causes his downfall. However, the significance of women comes to surface when Okonkwo is deported to his mother's village. Upon noticing Okonkwo's distress, his uncle Uchendu interprets the situation for him and states:

It is true that a child belongs to his father. But when the father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge,

in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme? (Achebe, 1994: 14)

In consequence, it can be concluded that the mother's home is ultimate place where one can find shelter and protection. It is the mother that accepts her children as they are, with all their flaws and mistakes. Therefore, the mother's home is the ultimate hiding place where one can find peace and comfort. Thus, the only respect and dignity women actually enjoy, is that of motherhood which is regarded sacred among the natives. As it is the case with every patriarchal society, women's foremost respected duty is child raising. Women are considered strong and reliable to take care of their children. This is the ultimate, "honourable role" assigned to the women of the male-dominated Igbo tribe.

### CONCLUSION

An ecofeminist point of view asserts that the subjugation of women and the natural environment are in consistence with one another. At first, this notion seems to contradict in Achebe's archetypal novel as the natives live in perfect harmony with nature and even worship nature as a local religion. Nonetheless, they do not show a similar respect for their women. However, this is severely subverted in the second part of the novel with the intervention of the white men. The Christian missionaries' arrival changes 'respect for nature' into 'exploitation of nature' as the Westerners have no bond with nature and merely see it as an asset to be claimed and to become wealthy. The natives are left with no choice but to convert to Christianity in order to survive and for them this means losing all ties with nature and acceptance of the Western, greedy mentality. Men used to belong to nature but now, nature belongs to men. In a symbolical way, with the coming of white colonisers, the natives are actually brutally punished for the abuse of their women.

The Igbo tribe's colonisation by the White Christians seems like a divine retribution for all their maltreatment and physical and mental abuse of their own women. Okonkwo, as the leader of the tribe bears the biggest responsibility in this punishment. He is blinded with extreme ambition of manliness and in turn gets to deal with a fierce opponent which he cannot beat. In other words, the oppressor becomes the oppressed at the end of the story. He who tested and demonstrated his strength on women committed suicide owing to the very painful realisation that the white men were superior and undefeatable. Thus, Okonkwo's hubris causes his ultimate downfall.

The novel ends with the smashing victory of western colonial powers over the natives (Gogoi, 2014: 4). The Igbo are left to starve, convert to Christianity and completely surrender their tribe to the Western colonisers. The natives' spiritual ties with the nature are replaced with the materialist, greedy mentality (4). At the end of the novel, the basic notion of ecofeminism becomes reality. The natives who were disrespectful to their women have also disregarded their land. Hence, the abuse of women is equivalent to the destruction of natural areas. From that perspective, Achebe does not provide a different view than Conrad. The second sex eventually finds itself in the same state with the colonised and exploited land that is known as the African continent.

Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, patriarchal hegemony is equivalent to the supremacy of the colonising/imperialist powers. The natural environment and women are oppressed by a common belligerent; the patriarchal imperialist order. Throughout the novel, women are either left out or discriminated from participating actively in the society. Women share the same destiny with nature and therefore the plight of women cannot be regarded apart from the exploitation of the environment. *Heart of Darkness* exposes from a coloniser's

perspective that the "civilised" people of the western world bear utmost responsibility for these oppressions.

All in all, both of these works of literature possess an equivalent setting where they expose the domination of women and the natural environment from different perspectives; that of the coloniser and the colonised. Both stories share a similar conduct of violence and oppression towards women and the environment. As advocated by the ecofeminist theory, the emancipation of women shall not take place without the liberation of nature. This will only be possible by establishing an egalitarian society based on equal rights for women and men and all other oppressed people. In their subtexts, both Conrad and Achebe imply the urgent need for such a mentality to emerge and implement so as to subvert the system of exploitation implanted by the capitalist/imperialist world order.

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