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Nature and Women in *Things Fall Apart*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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Abstract:

Nature and women have various similarities between them and ecofeminism studies the relationship between women and nature. Environment and women are both mothers, they give birth to new life. The world is a patriarchal society and men hold power over everything. Being the powerholders, they dominate the environment and women, these two become pawns in the hands of men. Set in a traditional African background Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* showcases instances of men dominating both land and women and also various similarities between both. Achebe shows both positive and negative viewpoints, there are times when nature and women are exploited but also times when both are considered supreme and prayed to. There are various native festivals to thank mother goddess. However, most of the times women are considered weak, and men who do not follow the set standards of masculinity are called women. This work shows light upon the dominance and exploitation of land and women and also how there are times when both are considered pious.

Keywords: ecofeminism, domination of land and women, environment and culture, relationship between women and nature, exploitation, hypermasculinity, objectification of nature and women.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Ecofeminism' was first used by French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, it was further developed by Ynestra King in 1976. Ecofeminism studies the intricate relationship between nature and women. It is largely considered as a part of the third wave feminism. It is an activist and academic movement which tries to find a connection

between the human and non-human world. It studies the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The ecofeminists primarily focus on human beings' domination of non-human world; and women. How does environmental degradation impact women? Women are equipped with the tasks of maintaining a household and feeding the family. In rural areas, they go out in the forests to collect firewood, walk several miles to fetch water, gather raw materials to maintain, and rebuild their huts. Due to environmental degradation necessities like water become scarce, forests are cleared out, there are irregular rains which in turn affect women as the sole responsible person for feeding a family. They have to walk larger distances to fetch a pot of water, collect firewood, irregular rains destroy the crops which leads to food shortages and as a mother and wife, she always feeds others before eating herself, sometimes leading to days without any food left to eat. Environmental degradation brings out conflicts between nature and the human world which often results in deaths.

According to ecofeminist scholars, nature and women are much alike, both of them give birth to new life. Nature and women both are mothers. Whenever a person is in a bad mood, they find solace when they are in nature's lap or their mother's lap, nature, and women both provide comfort when needed. They feed the world, take care of the people around, and relax them. But men think of nature and women as weak, something they need to take care of, and this is how they gain supremacy over them and then dominate and exploit them. According to Karen J. Warren-

'The Western world's basic beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions about itself and its inhabitants have been shaped by an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework, the purpose of which is to explain, justify, and maintain relationships of domination and subordination in general and men's domination of women in particular.'

Karen J. Warren Talks about value dualism, she explains how men and women are not considered opposite but man is considered supreme in the duo just like light is considered supreme over darkness, human beings are considered supreme over nature. She gives the logic of dominance as well, how men and women are equal but the patriarchal society considers men supreme and thus gives them the power to dominate over women.

THINGS FALL APART

‘Things Fall Apart’ by the African writer Chinua Achebe is a masterpiece. Achebe is the pioneer in African writings and is the father of African Literature. Things Fall Apart is his debut novel, which is set in Southern Nigeria, a country in Africa. Earlier before the rising of African literature, the image of Africa was portrayed as dark and primitive by non-African writers like Joseph Conrad. Achebe by presenting the real Africa in his debut novel changed the perspective the world had of Africa. He showed the lifestyle, culture, and traditions of the Igbo community. The story of the novel revolves around its chief character Okonkwo, a fierce warrior with a fiery temper. He hates weak men like his father, Unoka, and his son, Nwoye. He is a self-built man, who has worked hard and gained respect in his community and clan. He is an unbeatable wrestler. The novel is about Okonkwo’s life, his determination not to show weakness, his hypermasculinity, and his tragic demise. The novel also parallelly gives us a glimpse of African lifestyle and culture, their gods and ancestral spirits, the emergence of colonizers, and the treatment of nature and women as well.

NATURE AND WOMEN IN THINGS FALL APART

Things Fall Apart is a culturally rich novel where culture being the outcome of patriarchy dominates nature. Nature in its diverse forms leaves trails in the whole text, its images are sometimes visible out in the open and at times one needs to dig in deep. One recurring form of both nature and women is in the form of divine powers, the deities worshipped by the native people. The portrayed Igbo community rely heavily on their Gods and Goddesses for almost everything. They are respected and considered supreme. The main livelihood of the Igbo community is agriculture, so the land is very important to them. They pray to the earth goddess, Ani, a Week of Peace is celebrated to pray and seek blessings from the goddess before the plantation season. During the Week of Peace, everyone celebrates and live peacefully without any violence. One who breaks the peace has to pay for his doings. Okonkwo, the protagonist breaks the peace by beating his youngest wife Ojiugo who went out to get her hair plaited and neglected to cook dinner. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess says to Okonkwo,

‘We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessings our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish.’

They not only prayed to the goddess but also feared her. Okonkwo’s father, Unoka once consulted Agbala for the failure of his crops and he was screamed at by the priestess for being lazy and not doing his work properly when everyone else was working hard. She said to him, ‘Go home and work like a man.’ This shows that the goddesses not only blessed the hard workers but also made the lazy ones learn a lesson. Another inference that can be drawn here is land, one of the many gifts of mother earth can only be productive with the combined efforts of men. Several festivals were celebrated to honor the gods and goddesses. The Feast of the New Yam was also celebrated before the harvesting season as an occasion for thanking the earth goddess Ani, the source of all fertility. According to them Ani was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct, she was also supposed to be in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth. Everybody called guests and prepared a huge feast, decorated the compound they lived in, and their bodies as well. It was a festival of peace and harmony which had been made possible by nature’s blessings.

As nature lives in harmony, Okonkwo’s wives also lived in peace and harmony together. Okonkwo had three wives, the number of wives was related to one’s respect and power in the clan. The three wives had their huts and lived harmoniously. They helped each other in household chores, built fire for each other, the kids went together to fetch water for everyone. When a child’s pot fell and broke, it was the mother who consoled and comforted him. Mother and nature both provided comfort to a crying baby or a devastated man.

Mother and the mother earth prove to be the last resort from birth till death and after. Okonkwo is exiled for seven years because of the murder of a clansman he unknowingly commits, when one murders another unknowingly it is a crime of the female

order and the convict has to flee the clan and not return back for seven years, Okonkwo finds solace in his motherland, Mbanta. He is devastated when he reaches Mbanta, he only thinks about the time he will go back to his clan Umofia. It is Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle who inspires him with his speech on how a mother protects his children. He says,

'It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a 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 mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile.'

The speech by Uchendu shows how a mother even after being dead looks out for her children who are in trouble. The people in Mbanta believe that the mother is supreme. They even name their children Nneka, which means the mother is supreme in Ibo language. Okonkwo is inspired by Uchendu's speech and devotes himself to work. The land is blessed by rain just after that, the earth comes to life, this may symbolize a new beginning in Okonkwo's life as well.

Nature and women have a close relationship. In the Igbo community, it is the women's job to collect the firewood, provide food for the family, just like nature which provides food to the world. Achebe has also thrown light on some myths connected to nature, one of them is that, young women who desired children used to sit under the sacred ancient cotton tree for seeking blessings to get pregnant. Also, the people who died of sickness were considered an abomination to the earth goddess and were not given a proper burial, such people were left in the Evil Forest.

There are instances when nature is compared to women-the spectrum of care and affection, whenever two rainbows appear in the sky, the natives believe they are mother and daughter, one vibrant and beautiful just like the daughter and the other old and faint shadow like the mother. Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma goes through moments of depression

when she snaps at everyone like an angry dog, Ezinma's moods can be compared to the violent moods of nature. Her snaps can be compared to the fiery strikes of thunder and lightning in a rainy season, representing the moments of depression.

The African society depicted by Chinua Achebe is patriarchal and there are no doubts as to how women are treated in a male-dominated society. The oppression and exploitation of women prevail in this work as well. The protagonist Okonkwo is a man with a fiery temper, he hates weak men and calls them women. Addressing men who do not have the desired masculine traits as women is an insult to both women and those men. The African word for women *agbala* is considered a word for insulting others juxtaposing with the divine figure of Umofia.

Okonkwo beats his wives for petty things. He beats his youngest wife for not returning to serve him food on time as she went out to have her hair plaited and forgot about Okonkwo. All his wives even receive a hard beating for cutting a banana leaf. He misfires a bullet at Ekwefi, his middle wife when she mocks his masculinity for never being able to pull the trigger while hunting. Achebe shows Okonkwo's desire to be in power and be supreme just like any other man in these words, 'He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for a woman.' This shows how women are used as mere objects to suppress and feel powerful. Another man named Uzowulu had also beaten his wife almost to death several times; even when she was pregnant, he beat her till she miscarried. There are various instances of domestic violence. This shows that women folk suffer at all times, they have to bear their husbands temper without uttering any words. They become the punching bags on whom all the rage is let out. Hypermasculinity is praised, to show emotions and affection is a sign of weakness to them. This is how men use their so-called power and masculinity.

Women are treated as commodities, the more the number of wives the more power and respect one has in the community, the same goes for land as well. An instance when Okonkwo returns from his exile, he seeks to regain his fame and personal pride through his beautiful daughters, the new roots of attention and ties. This deduces that the number of women and acreage are parallel to the amount of power and respect a man is given in society.

Okonkwo loves his daughter Ezinma, who is so strong, smart and intelligent but he is not happy with the fact that she is a girl, he always wishes that Ezinma were a boy. He despises his father and son for not being more masculine. Some qualities of Ezinma fades just because she was born with a female body whilst Nwoye is frequently criticized as he lacks the desired male traits. Okonkwo is happy when he sees his son, Nwoye grumble about women. He says, 'No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (especially his women) he was really not a man.' This shows the amount of respect a woman has in the eyes of his husband. A man is not considered strong if he takes his wife's opinions. A wife is not expected to cook and eat while her husband starves. Even the crops are divided on the base of gender. Yam is considered as the king of crops is a man's crop and coco yams, cassava, beans, etc. are women's crops. Nature and women are considered to be the sign of prosperity and progress but both are overpowered and exploited by men.

CONCLUSION

Men within the hollow hide of culture dominate and exploit women and nature. Culture is also a product of a patriarchal society that has produced such customs and norms which subjugate both nature as well as women. Men fear nature only when it comes to a point where it strikes back, till then the exploitation continues. Men rule every aspect of life and women have to suffer because of them. Ecofeminism brings both nature and women under a wing, thus bringing the exploited class together. Women and nature need to be paid more attention and given the right respect and status they deserve. Life is maintained through mutual efforts of men and women in the canopy of nature.

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