



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Nature's Voices: Exploring Eco-Feminist Perspectives in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart**

<sup>1</sup>Nayab Anwar\*, <sup>2</sup>Arooba Hussain and <sup>3</sup>Eram Amjad

1. Lecturer, Department of English Languages and Literature, Punjab College for Women, Wazirabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. MPhil Scholar, Department of Linguistics and Communications, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan
3. Senior English Teacher, English Department, The Punjab School, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author      cnayab214@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

Eco-feminism posits that the subjugation of women is intricately connected to the oppression of nature. The study focuses on the examination of the intricate relationship between women and ecology, asserting that the marginalization of women and the exploitation of nature are intertwined. Discrimination and oppression stemming from power dynamics related to class, gender, and race are directly correlated with environmental exploitation. In patriarchal societies, women and nature are commonly perceived as fertile entities capable of providing life, care, and shelter. This paper highlights the Chinua Achebe's use of characters like Ani, the earth goddess, and Ezeani, the priest of the goddess, to underscore the parallels between women and their significance in terms of fertility and production. Additionally, it aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the female characters in Things Fall Apart in relation to nature, examining the exploitation of both women and the environment depicted in the novel. The study also analyzes dominant male practices in Things Fall Apart, emphasizing how women and nature are portrayed as innocent, female, productive, and susceptible to exploitation.

**Keywords:** Culture, Ecology, Exploitation, Feminism, Gender, Nature, Oppression, Patriarchal, Society

**Introduction**

Eco-feminism, a form of criticism, seeks to examine the interconnection between women and nature, aligning feminist principles with ecological concerns. Coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book "Le Féminisme ou la Mort," eco-feminism emerged alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement in the mid-1970s. Mary Mellor defines it as a movement acknowledging the link between the exploitation of the natural world and the subordination of women, combining elements from both the feminist and green movements while challenging their respective paradigms.

Eco-feminists emphasize the distinctive connections between women and nature, interpreting their repression and exploitation in parallel terms. Traditionally "female" values like reciprocity, nurturing, and cooperation are seen as shared traits between women and nature. The alignment of women and nature is rooted in their shared history of oppression within a patriarchal Western society.

The societal roles of women and nature are closely interwoven, centered around a common purpose of nurturing, reproducing, and recreating. Vandana Shiva argues that women, particularly in subsistence economies, possess a unique connection to the environment through their daily interactions, emphasizing holistic ecological knowledge. However, this connection is often overlooked within a capitalist paradigm that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of nature and women's lives.

Eco-feminists assert that the domination of women and nature is fundamentally linked, making environmental efforts integral to overcoming the oppression of women. In contrast to liberal feminism, eco-feminism does not solely seek equality with men but strives for the liberation of women as women. Central to this liberation is the acknowledgment of the value in activities traditionally associated with women, such as childbirth, nurturing, and domestic responsibilities.

Critics have accused eco-feminism of reinforcing oppressive stereotypes and essentialism. Western society tends to treat women as inferior to men, nature as inferior to culture, and humans as separate and superior to the natural environment. Eco-feminists focus on these connections, examining how they contribute to the devaluation and oppression of both women and nature.

In essence, eco-feminism underscores the interdependence of all life, humanity's role within the Earth's ecosystem, and the non-hierarchical nature of a system where all components mutually influence each other. These principles are emphasized to counter relationships dominated by values of control and oppression.

### **Literature Review**

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is widely regarded as one of the finest literary works to emerge from the African context, standing as a pioneering piece that laid the groundwork for African literature. Translated into over 58 languages worldwide and acknowledged among Africa's top 100 books of the 20th century, Achebe's masterpiece continues to illuminate the past, present, and future of African literature. Notably, *Things Fall Apart* garners the most frequent readership and critical response among Achebe's works, extensively studied in Europe, India, and North America, generating numerous analytical works.

Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was a deliberate response to colonialist depictions of Africa and Africans prevalent in literature, notably challenging Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. Achebe aimed to counter the portrayal of Africans as mindless individuals in need of European enlightenment. The novel presents the intricate social systems, values, and traditions of Igbo society, offering a nuanced perspective on customs such as the abandonment of multiple birth babies and human sacrifices.

Before *Things Fall Apart*, European-authored novels dominated African narratives, often depicting Africans as savages requiring enlightenment. Achebe shattered this perspective by portraying Igbo society sympathetically, enabling readers to reevaluate the impact of European colonialism from a different angle. Achebe emphasized that African cultures possessed depth, value, beauty, poetry, and dignity, challenging the notion that Africans first learned of culture from Europeans.

The language of *Things Fall Apart*, written in English but authentically African, played a crucial role in shaping modern African novels. Achebe's portrayal of Igbo life influenced subsequent African writers, establishing him as a mentor figure. The novel reflects a culture in transition, with indigenous practices perceived as unconventional by foreigners but accepted within the community.

Regarded as a milestone in African literature, *Things Fall Apart* is seen as the quintessential modern African novel in English, widely read across Nigeria and Africa. The novel explores the history, culture, and relationship between indigenous African life and nature. Achebe's depiction of a harmonious connection between humans and the natural environment emphasizes the African ideal of a tranquil traditional society.

Critical commentaries on *Things Fall Apart* abound, with scholars offering diverse perspectives on its significance. The novel's enduring relevance lies in its portrayal of pre-colonial African culture and its influence on subsequent African novelists. The impact of *Things Fall Apart* continues to resonate across generations, making it an enduring African classic whose fate will be determined by the future.

### **Material and Methods**

As reiterated earlier, eco-feminism intricately delves into the exploration of the dynamic and intertwined relationship between women and ecology. It endeavors to elucidate the profound interconnectedness and inseparable bond between women and the natural environment within society. The underlying premise of this theory posits that the subjugation of women and the oppression of nature are inextricably linked. The theory asserts that when women experience oppression and violation, nature is inevitably threatened, and conversely, when nature is subjected to the unbridled actions of humanity, women are also imperiled. The exploitation of women due to power differentials based on class, gender, and race is directly correlated with the exploitation of the environment. The manifestation of these interconnected themes is palpable in Chinua Achebe's novel, "*Things Fall Apart*."

In the narrative of "*Things Fall Apart*," Achebe subtly, perhaps even unconsciously, reveals the intricate web connecting women and nature. Women are portrayed as symbolic embodiments of productivity, sustenance, fertility, and continuity, upon whom the peace, prosperity, and survival of the community heavily depend. Nature is depicted as working hand in hand with women to ensure the peace, stability, and fertility of the entire community. The novel unveils the intrinsic values and role of the earth goddess, Ani, who holds sway over the fertility and growth of crops in Umuofia. Ani, the earth goddess, is not merely a deity; she is the divine force responsible for the prosperity of Umuofia's crops. Ani oversees the harvest, bestowing blessings upon hardworking farmers for a bountiful yield. The novel introduces the concept of the Week of Peace, a dedicated period between harvest and planting seasons, during which the community honors and appeases the earth goddess. This week is marked by peaceful coexistence, the exchange of gifts, and a collective celebration of peace to ensure a prosperous harvest in the upcoming year.

However, the protagonist, Okonkwo, transgresses the sacred Week of Peace by assaulting his wife, Ojiugo, for a perceived offense. The priest, Ezeani, articulates the implications of Okonkwo's sacrilegious act, emphasizing the sanctity of the Week of Peace and its integral connection to the earth goddess. Okonkwo is chastised for disrupting the harmony mandated by the goddess, and the priest underscores the potential calamity that could befall the entire community due to such transgressions.

Okonkwo, recognizing the gravity of his actions, is compelled to make reparations, offering sacrifices to the earth goddess in the form of a she-goat, a hen, a length of cloth, a hundred cowries, and a pot of palm wine. This violation of the Week of Peace serves as a powerful symbol with profound implications that an eco-feminist critic would find both intriguing and insightful.

The incident symbolically underscores the inseparable connection between women and nature. In the African context, nature holds immense symbolic power. As noted by Moslem Zolfagharkhani and Reyhaneh Sadat Shadpour, African culture is rooted in the principles of nature, discouraging cruelty among its people. The relationship with nature is considered sacred, impacting both morality and decision-making. The beating of Ojiugo, during the Week of Peace, not only offends the earth goddess but also desecrates the natural order. Ojiugo's tears resonate symbolically with the violation and desecration of Ani, the earth goddess. Okonkwo's subsequent act of repentance and sacrifice seeks to restore not only harmony with Ojiugo but also appease the offended earth goddess.

Additionally, another significant festival in the novel, the Feast of the New Yam, further emphasizes the reverence for the earth goddess, Ani. This occasion serves as an expression of gratitude to Ani, the source of all fertility, and heralds the beginning of a season of abundance. The feast underscores the pivotal role Ani plays in the lives of the community, transcending the influence of other deities.

In conclusion, the complex interplay between women and nature depicted in "Things Fall Apart" serves as a rich tapestry for eco-feminist analysis. The novel's symbolic events, such as the violation of the Week of Peace, unveil the profound interconnectedness between the treatment of women and the state of the environment. Achebe's narrative becomes a microcosm reflecting broader eco-feminist themes, where the health of the natural world is intertwined with the treatment and status of women in society.

## Results and Discussion

The pivotal role and significance of Ani, the earth goddess, within the Umuofia community cannot be overstated. Ani's favor brings forth fertility and bountiful harvests, a connection deeply acknowledged by the inhabitants. The productivity of many women in Umuofia, including Okonkwo's wives, is attributed to the blessings of Ani. Notably, all of Okonkwo's wives, except for Ekwefi, are blessed with children. Ekwefi, who had eloped with Okonkwo, faces the challenge of Ogbanje children, having buried nearly nine of them. One might speculate that her unconventional marital history, elopement, and prior suitor, may have influenced her predicament. Despite this, the women in the novel are generally portrayed as productive and fertile, recipients of Ani's blessings.

This scholarly exposition embarks on a comprehensive exploration through an eco-feminist lens into Chinua Achebe's literary masterpiece, "Things Fall Apart," with an overarching objective of meticulously unraveling the multifaceted roles assumed by women and their intricate interconnection with the natural world. The primary focus of this inquiry centers on elucidating how the symbiosis between ecology and women unfolds as a synergistic force, diligently laboring hand in hand to cultivate an environment that epitomizes an idyllic, flawless, and prosperous realm. The central argument posits that the oppression and maltreatment endured by women are not isolated occurrences but resonate as a direct affront to the integrity of nature itself. This intricate entwinement between women and nature, aptly unveiled by eco-feminism, serves as a critical vantage point for comprehending the profound implications of the exploitation of women, a phenomenon inexorably linked to the precarious state of the environment.

The thematic underpinning of this exploration underscores the notion that the destinies of women and nature are inextricably intertwined; a linkage that becomes perceptible through the eco-feminist lens. This theoretical framework enables us to discern that the exploitation of women invariably translates into the exploitation of nature, and conversely, the exploitation of nature poses an existential threat to the very fabric of society. The roles played by women and nature extend far beyond the conventional realms of fertility, caregiving, and shelter provision, transcending into higher echelons of societal importance. In weaving the narrative tapestry of "Things Fall Apart," Achebe deftly employs the characters of Ani, the earth goddess, and Ezeani, the priest entrusted with her worship, as conduits for illuminating the latent intricacies, interplays, and parallels between women. This encompasses their significance and their alignment with natural phenomena, particularly in terms of fertility, productivity, and the stability that society perpetually craves.

The women depicted within the narrative of "Things Fall Apart" emerge as exemplars of strength, submissiveness, and conscientious duty across diverse societal roles. Remarkably, their resilience is underscored by a steadfast commitment to their expected roles as both mothers and counselors. A poignant irony surfaces as Okonkwo, the central

character, finds in his daughter, Ezinma, the very qualities and vigor that he perennially yearns for in his sons, particularly Nwoye. The women within the narrative become not only role models but also pillars upon which the societal edifice stands, exemplified by characters such as Chielo, the priestess of Agballa, who adeptly navigates the dual responsibilities of her spiritual role and maternal duties as a widow.

Uchendu, a discerning character within the narrative, articulates the supremacy of women through the evocative expression, "Nneka – mother is supreme." This proclamation is not mere happenstance but a profound acknowledgment of the pivotal role women play in shaping and sustaining societal structures. An intriguing revelation within the narrative further reinforces this acknowledgment – the most potent medicine safeguarding the entire Umuofia clan is attributed to the wisdom and expertise of an elderly woman with a single leg. Aptly named *agadi – nwanyi*, or "old woman," the medicine attains a revered status and has its shrine at the heart of Umuofia. The writer artfully illustrates the mystique surrounding this potent concoction, emphasizing the essential role played by an elderly woman who, if encountered after dusk, can be seen hopping about the shrine.

Despite these commendable portrayals, a disconcerting reality emerges within the narrative – the women, despite being instrumental in the sustenance and invincibility of the Umuofia clan, find themselves ensnared by exploitative cultural practices and entrenched patriarchal norms. The systemic oppression inflicted upon women inadvertently extends to nature, creating a parallel vulnerability for both entities. The liberation and emancipation of women, therefore, become intrinsically linked to the liberation and freedom of nature to a considerable extent. In an era where the global community grapples with the challenges of globalization, the narrative serves as a poignant reminder that not only are women endangered, but nature itself faces continuous threats.

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the author's intent is to underscore the urgency of mitigating various forms of exploitation and violations that parallel offenses against the very source of survival and existence. The call for the liberation of women resonates as a clarion call for the preservation of nature. By contemplating and actualizing these ideals to their utmost potential, societies may find themselves charting a course towards preserving the environment. This conscientious approach becomes imperative as we confront escalating threats to our eco-system, presenting an existential challenge that demands concerted efforts to safeguard our planet and ensure enduring peace on Earth.

However, Okonkwo's aggressive behavior towards his wives becomes a recurring threat to the community's peace, despite the overall fertility and prosperity. Apart from violating the sacred Week of Peace, he subjects his second wife, Ekwefi, to physical abuse for a seemingly trivial act of plucking leaves from a banana tree. This violence is exemplified in a harrowing incident where Okonkwo, driven by rage, almost shoots Ekwefi. The potential consequences of this act are significant, as it could have disrupted the joyous New Yam Festival, inviting the wrath of Aní. The earth goddess is a protective force, rewarding labor and ensuring justice within the community.

Aní, the earth goddess, plays a crucial role in the agricultural practices of the Umuofia people. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, faced criticism from the Agballa priestess for his unsuccessful farming endeavors. The priestess attributed Unoka's meager harvests to his weakness in wielding his machete and hoe. This reflects the community's belief in the connection between human effort, respect for the earth goddess, and agricultural success.

Furthermore, Aní serves as a guardian of justice, acting as a mediator between the living and the dead. In cases of crimes committed within the community, Aní ensures that the guilty party faces the appropriate consequences. When Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's son, Aní demands retribution to appease the soul of the deceased and maintain

balance within the community. Okonkwo is consequently compelled to flee from the land for seven years, as dictated by Ani's justice system.

An eco-feminist perspective sheds light on the parallels between the treatment of women and the reverence for nature in the novel. The interconnectedness of women and nature is evident in the communal reliance on both for prosperity and harmony. The shared discrimination faced by women and nature becomes apparent through the patriarchal structures and limitations imposed on them. Women, like nature, are seen as replaceable commodities, subject to exchange between men.

The oppression of women is further emphasized through the discriminatory laws and practices prevalent in Umuofia. Women are treated as property, and their worth is quantified through bride prices, reinforcing a patriarchal system where men hold authority over them. The act of returning the bride price in case of a woman running away from her husband underscores the transactional nature of women's status in the community.

In essence, the narrative points towards the liberation and fair treatment of women as a key factor in fostering peace, stability, and harmony within the community. The writer's portrayal of women's struggles against traditional norms and patriarchal structures aligns with a broader eco-feminist perspective, highlighting the need for equality and justice for both women and nature. As women find solace in nature, their liberation becomes intertwined with the overall balance and well-being of the community and the earth goddess, Ani.

## **Conclusion**

This scholarly endeavor embarks on an in-depth exploration from an eco-feminist standpoint, delving into Chinua Achebe's magnum opus, "Things Fall Apart," with a singular and profound intention – to illuminate the intricate roles played by women and their symbiotic relationship with the natural world. The fundamental premise underpinning this analysis posits that ecology and women coalesce harmoniously to cultivate an environment that epitomizes an ideal, flawless, and flourishing milieu. Moreover, the maltreatment and subjugation directed at women are unequivocally tantamount to the degradation and exploitation of nature itself. In essence, the interconnectedness of women and nature, a fundamental tenet expounded by eco-feminism, unfolds as a focal point in discerning the intricate tapestry woven between the exploitation of women and the precarious state of the environment.

The symbiotic relationship between women and nature is not confined to the conventional roles of fertility, caregiving, and provision of shelter. Achebe, in his narrative, artfully employs the characters of Ani, the earth goddess, and Ezeani, the priest of the goddess, to unravel the profound intricacies, interplays, and shared characteristics between women. This spans the realms of fertility, productivity, and stability, essential components that society perpetually craves.

Within the narrative of "Things Fall Apart," the women emerge as stalwart figures, embodying strength, submission, and unwavering commitment to their diverse roles. Their strength and resilience in fulfilling their expected roles as mothers and counselors remain a testament to their character. Notably, Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, becomes a repository of the qualities and vigor he yearned for in his sons, especially Nwoye. The women, whether in familial roles or as priestesses, serve as role models and pillars upon which the societal structure stands. A striking illustration of this empowerment is evident in Chielo, the priestess of Agballa, who adeptly juggles her spiritual duties with her maternal responsibilities as a widow.

Uchendu, a discerning character in the narrative, underscores the supremacy of women with the poignant expression, "Nneka – mother is supreme." This acknowledgment of the preeminence of women is not merely coincidental but serves as a profound recognition of the vital role women play in shaping the fabric of society. It resonates with the revelation that the most potent medicine safeguarding the entire Umuofia clan emanates from the wisdom and expertise of an elderly woman with a single leg. The medicine, aptly named *agadi – nwanyi* or "old woman," is a testament to the central role women play in preserving the vitality of the community.

However, amidst these commendable portrayals, a disconcerting reality emerges. The very women who contribute significantly to the sustenance and invincibility of the Umuofia clan find themselves ensnared by exploitative cultural practices and entrenched patriarchal norms. The oppression inflicted upon women inadvertently extends to nature, as both entities become susceptible to exploitation by men driven by selfish desires. The women and nature, characterized as innocent, female, productive, yet vulnerable, find themselves subjected to multifaceted forms of oppression.

It is noteworthy that the epitome of protection for the entire Umuofia community, the formidable medicine, is traced back to a woman. This underscores the indispensable role and position of women within the natural environment they inhabit. Paradoxically, despite being the nurturers and custodians of communal well-being, women endure systemic exploitation embedded in various cultural norms of patriarchal societies.

The subjugation of women, intricately tied to the exploitation of nature, raises critical questions about the sustainability of our global village. The novel draws attention to the unfortunate reality that not only are women endangered, but nature itself faces continuous threats in our relentless pursuit to globalize our world. The resounding message echoing through the narrative is a call for the emancipation and liberation of women, echoing in tandem with the liberation and freedom of nature to a considerable extent. This clarion call urges societies to mitigate forms of exploitation and violations that parallel offenses against the very source of survival and existence.

As we contemplate and actualize these ideals to their utmost potential, we may find ourselves carving a path towards preserving our environment. This conscientious approach becomes imperative as we grapple with the escalating threats to our eco-system, presenting an existential challenge that demands concerted efforts to safeguard our planet and ensure enduring peace on Earth.

## References

- Achebe, C. (1973). *The Novelist as Teacher*. In G.D. Killiam (Ed.), *African Writers on African Writing*. Evanston: North-Western University Press.
- Achebe, C. (1973). *The Role of the Writer in a New Nation*. In G.D. Killiam (Ed.), *African Writers on African Writing*. Evanston: North-Western University Press.
- Achebe, C. (2008). *Things Fall Apart*. Essex: Heinemann.
- Achebe, C. (2013, October). The Portrait of a Writer as a Wordsmith: Discourse Techniques in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, 50 (7), 156-203.
- Baldwin, G. (1967). *Strange Peoples and Stranger Customs*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc.
- Harris, A. (2002, November). The Green Fuse for Environmental Philosophy, Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, Eco-feminism, Earth-centered Spirituality. Retrieved from <http://www.thegreenfuse.org/>
- Leek, L. S. (2001, Summer). Reading as a Woman: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Feminist Criticism. *African Studies Quarterly*, 5(2), 516-556
- Mellor, M. (1997). *Introduction to Feminism & Ecology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Okoye-Ugwu, S. (2013, October). Going Green: Ecocritical Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, 50 (6) 48-96.
- Quinby, L. (1990). *Ecofeminism and the Politics of Resistance*. In I. Diamond & G. F. Orenstein (Eds.), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (pp. 122-127). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Salleh, A. (1992). The Ecofeminism/Deep Ecology Debate: A Reply to Patriarchal Reason. *Environmental Ethics*, 14, 195-216.
- Shadpour, R. S., & Zolfagharkhani, M. (n.d.). An Eco-critical Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS)*, 4(2), 210-214.
- Warren, K. J. (1990). The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism. *Environmental Ethics*, 12, 125-146.