

# ECOCRITICISM AND AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN APPROACH TO SELECTED NOVELS BY CHINUA ACHEBE

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## Résumé

*Cet article affirme que, tout comme ils l'ont fait dans d'autres domaines de l'activisme social, les écrivains africains peuvent jouer un rôle important dans les questions environnementales. Dans ses romans *Things Fall Apart* et *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe a établi des relations entre la littérature et l'environnement. Le lecteur perçoit donc quel rôle la littérature peut jouer dans la protection de l'écosystème et le changement climatique. Cette étude présente les stratégies narratives par lesquelles Chinua Achebe appelle à l'utilisation de la littérature pour protéger l'environnement africain et éviter ainsi les dégâts du changement climatique. L'implémentation de l'écocritique et de l'éco-spiritualité à *Things Fall Apart* et *Anthills of the Savannah* de même que l'analyse des textes du corpus me permettent de découvrir que la littérature joue un rôle important dans la préservation de l'environnement. Un autre résultat majeur attendu est que l'Afrique pré-coloniale et ses religions traditionnelles ont toujours protégé l'environnement auquel elle accorde une attention particulière contrairement à l'Afrique coloniale et post-coloniale qui détruisent l'environnement et provoquent des changements climatiques qui appellent à la protection de notre environnement.*

**Mots-clés** : *Écocritique, éco-spiritualité, environnement, religions traditionnelles, changement climatique.*

## Abstract

*This article posits that, just as they have in other social activism, African writers can play a significant role in environmental issues. In his *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe has established relationships between literature and environment. The reader sees therefore what role literature can play in the protection of the ecosystem and climate change. This study makes available the narrative strategies through which Achebe calls for the use of literature to protect African environment and therefore avoid the damages of climate change. The implementation of ecocriticism and eco-spirituality to *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah* along with corpus text analysis enables me to discover that literature plays an important role in the preservation of environment. Another major expected result is that pre-colonial Africa and its traditional religions have always protected environment to which it devotes special regards contrary to the colonial and post colonial Africa which destroys environment and causes climate change which calls for the protection of our environment.*

**Keywords** : *Ecocriticism, eco-spirituality, environment, traditional religions, climate change.*

## Introduction

Although Chinua Achebe's focus in his novels is obviously on the fight against colonialism and its imperialistic policies in Africa, he does not fail to pay a great attention to environmental issues as related to ecocriticism and African traditional religions. The corpus texts of this article consist of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The importance dedicated to nature in African religions as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in his selected novels under study raises a critical attention in my mind. It seems more than interesting to probe into the actual perception of environment in Africa before the arrival of white missionaries in order to reveal how Africans devoted much protection to Mother-Earth contrary to the destruction of environment, the cutting of trees as promoted by colonisation and its imported values.

As an African environmental activist, Chinua Achebe has brought the contribution of literature to environmental protection and climate change to the world's attention through his portrayal of environmental-based issues in *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. However, few critics and creative writers have ventured in the study of environment in African literature as sustained by William Slaymaker (2007: 683) when he says that: "the African echo of global green approaches to literature and literary criticism has been faint", that is to say, hardly perceptible. Actually, rare criticism about Achebe's novels which are the main focus of this study might fall under the rubric of "nature writing", to speak like Slaymaker. This article falls under that rubric and prolongs critical debates about Achebe's novels to uncover silence on environmental issues as related to African religions. Of pertinence also is Christine Loflin's *African Horizons: The Landscapes of African Fiction* (1998) which constitutes a prime example of African criticism about literature and environment. I totally agree with Slaymaker when he opines that: "There is no rush by African literary and cultural critics to adopt ecocriticism or the literature of the environment". That is why I propose in this article to study

environmental issues as related to ecocriticism and eco-spirituality in the African context.

To carry out this objective, ecocriticism is used as the theoretical framework which sustains my analysis in this essay. It is commonly known as the multi/interdisciplinary studies of literature and the environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2004). These scholars among others note that ecocriticism resorts to more than a theory which indeed may have nothing in common in order to address environmental issues from the literary standpoint. For this reason, Buell (1995) prefers even the concept of “environmental criticism” to cover more than a domain to which ecocriticism resorts. Besides, eco-spirituality will be used to discuss the spiritual relationships between Africans and their environment. According to Valerie Lincoln (2000 : 227), “Ecospirituality is a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and environment”. The study is limited to thorough textual analysis of the selected novels. Extracts will be taken from the novels under consideration for interpretation. This essay is broken into two sections. The first one entitled “The Religious Rrelevance of Environment” examines strategies of environmental protection and reveals the sacred role of environment in Africa. The second section titled “Challenges of Climate Change” discusses the effects of climate change as fictionalized in the corpus texts of this study.

## **1. The Religious Rrelevance of Environment**

This first section of my article essentially discusses the African perception of the ecosystem and environment because I believe that that eco-spiritual perception played an important role in the interaction of Africans and their environment. A thorough understanding of key concepts such as ecocriticism, eco-spirituality and environment are central to the issues I am trying to raise in this section.

Ecocriticism as a means of analysing nature in literature has been defined by Lawrence Buell (2001: 20) in his *The Environmental Imagination*, as the study of the relationship between literature and the

environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis. Eco-spirituality as a literary theory investigates the spiritual relationship and interactions between characters and their environment as displayed in a novel. Clearly then, I intend, to demonstrate that there are close relationships between literature and the ecosystem or the environment to imply that religious and eco-spiritual ideologies in Africa impact Africans' relationships with their environment. In this perspective, I agree with Stella Okoye-Ugwu when she argues in her "Going Green: Ecocritical Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" that as a theoretical discourse, ecocriticism negotiates between the human and the non-human (2010: 154). According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition*, environment is "the natural world in which people, animals and plants live" (2010: 491). In fact, in a literary discourse, it is more accurate to talk of setting which is the fictitious environment in which actions and episodes of a creative work are set. Setting may be fictional or real and is defined as "a place or situation in which something happens or exists" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition* (2010: 491). Simply put, I am tempted to conclude that environment is therefore a set which consists of man and all that surrounds him. Creative writers have more often got inspiration from real communities that they seek to recreate by fictionalizing human relationships with environment. As such, through the channel of creativity and imagination, Chinua Achebe exhibits ecocritical as well as eco-spiritual aspects in his *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

In *Things Fall Apart*, what strikingly attracts ecocritical and eco-spiritual readers's attention is the way its author portrays a tranquil traditional society full of love for one another and people living harmoniously with elements of nature. So intense is the relationship between the people of Umuofia and their environment. This is synonymous with what I am tempted to term early ecological consciousness; that is to say, the African's sensitivities about the importance of preserving the intimate link between the land and themselves many centuries before the arrival of European missionaries. This is possible because of the importance

granted to religious perceptions of nature and all the elements it consists of. Linn White (1967: 6) recalls that:

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.

The belief that each single element of nature has “its own genius” is very telling about people’s respect and perpetual struggle to preserve environment in the selected novels of this study. Commenting on the degree to which the Umuofia people co-exist and show great regard to nature in *Things Fall Apart*, Okoye-Ugwu maintains that: “The markets, the farms, the village square, the shrines of the various deities, and the people are all engaged in a severe and harmonious interrelatedness with nature. The land is revered in Umuofia community” (2010 :160). These are clear instances that demonstrate eco-spiritual relationships between Achebe’s characters and their environment. Actually, in *Things Fall Apart* and out here in African traditional societies, the respect for African religious prescriptions is highly regarded and this allows the individual to enjoy a harmonious life in his environment. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Chinua Achebe notes that “what the African writer must do is draw on the spiritual bond that exists between the true artist and his community to take himself and his readers into a meaningful future” (1975: 87). Tellingly enough, that “spiritual bond” Achebe exhibits between Umuofians and their environment is indicative of the special treatment environment benefits from Achebe’s fictional men of Umuofian and other villages. Religion therefore plays an important role and contributes to the protection of environment. In this regard, we are

made to understand that the Earth goddess, *Ani* is in charge of the whole environment in *Things Fall Apart*. This cultural symbolism is not portrayed by accident, rather it highlights that environment and related issues are dear to people in that fictitious Igbo society. As for Okoye-Ugwu (2010: 158):

Some of the deities they believe in, include, the goddess of the earth *Ani*, which is in charge of fertility, the goddess of the sky and thunder bolt, 'Amadiora, and the pillar of water, 'Idemmili', whose totem is the sacred python. The most important of all the deities in religious and social life of the people is *Ani*, the Earth deity. Certainly, the goddess of the earth is held in higher esteem than all the other deities.

It becomes crystal clear that environment occupies a relevant religious role and is worshipped with much devotion. Consequently, it is carefully preserved and the only occasions Umuofian men cut trees is for their agricultural and religious needs only (*Things Fall Apart*, 13). Due to that religious perception of trees, forest and nature as a whole, Umuofians may be regarded by ecocritical and eco-spiritual readers of *Things Fall Apart* as environmental activists. They preserve forests from destruction and can keep them untouched since the beginning of things:

The short trees and sparse undergrowth which surrounded the men's village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the axe and the bush-fire. The sun breaking through their leaves and branches threw a pattern of light and shade on the sandy footway" (*Things Fall Apart*, 41-42).

Since trees are not cut at random, the reader comes across many forests in the novel classified according to their cultural roles. The narrator of *Things Fall Apart* makes the Evil Forest appear many times in the novel.

What is more, the fear of the forest and nature is what dominates and guides Okonkwo's fiery temper and violence. Besides, it demonstrates the spiritual connections between Okonkwo and his environment. For this purpose, the narrator comments that:

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But 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 the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw (*Things Fall Apart*, 9).

This passage is particularly significant as it makes available the religious relevance of environment and its elements in the life of Okonkwo, the leading character, and most other characters of *Things Fall Apart*. Religiously talking, Umuofians show great fear of the forces of nature by preserving it and conforming to traditional regulations which decreed that some forests or trees should not be cut or set fire. There are punishments that await the ones who will dare to violate the laws of nature. In a traditional African context like the one described in *Things Fall Apart*, man is not the master of nature but nature is the master of man since he fears its forces. Most objects of nature are often used to worship gods. It is obvious that trees, forests, lakes and wood, to mention just a few, are used in African religious practices to symbolize personal gods or *chi*. The narrator of *Anthills of the Savannah* informs the reader: "That we are surrounded by deep mysteries is known to all...In the beginning Power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority..." (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 102). The above extract confirms my standpoint that each member of Achebe's imaginative Republic of Kangan is fully aware that his/her environment or all that surrounds him/her is under the control of some mysteries and therefore manifests a kind of fear of nature which lays deep within individuals for it is culturally handed down from one generation to the other. I maintain therefore that, what people do

about their environment depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.

For his readership to become aware that traditional Africa has a particular regard to nature to which it dedicates a cult, Achebe gets the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* introduce Okonkwo to the reader in the following terms: “Near the barn was a small house, the ‘medecine house’ or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children” (*Things Fall Apart*, 10). Gillian Gane grants much critical attention the above passage of *Things Fall Apart* and supports that trees play a central religious role and inspire fear because of their sacred status. For this purpos he writes: “When sources of fear for the Igbo are enumerated, high on the list is ‘the fear of the forest’, followed immediately by the ‘forces of nature” (2007: 42).

Fear is therefore used as a narrative style and is extremely central on the one hand because it is that which prevents Umuofians from destroying their forest and trees at random and on the other it helps preserving environment. Fear of nature is introduced to readers as a major motive for people’s interest in preserving their environment. Even Christians fear Hell and that is why they conform to Christian’s norms. Christianity gives people freedom in their relationships with nature and makes man master of nature whereas African traditional relegions compell man to behave according to the dictates of nature’s religious prescription and make therefore nature the master of man. Of pertinence also is the portrayal of Unoka as a great environmental activist. To achieve this goal, Unoka is introduced to the reader as a protector par excellence of environment. In fact, due to the weakness of his arms and his machet, he uses not to cut trees for his farms, though he “sow his yam on exausted farms that take no labourer to clear” (TFA, 13). Even though the passage is meant to show the extent to which Unoka is a lazy character, it reveals however that he can be



perceived as a great environmentalist as he does not intend to cut trees even though this is a key condition for a good harvest.

## 2. Challenges of Climate Change

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* concentrates most primarily on the problem of political leadership in postcolonial Africa like none of his other post-independence novels. However, this second section of my essay shows the consequences of political leaders' misuse of power that brings about many bad consequences in the fictive society of Kangan among which that of climate change and the creation of an environment which does not favor a harmonious life. The subsetting into question is Abazon neglected by the political leaders as a punishment for its people's refusal to elect Sam, His Excellency, for life. Climate change consequences are numerous for Abazonians and for politicians themselves as well.

The novel's title itself appears as an inspiring source for an informed ecocritical reader since he/she seeks in a literary text to investigate man's relationship with nature. The idea of savannah fortells about a hostile place for man's endeavour to enjoy a peaceful life. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a savannah is "a wide flat open area of land, especially in Africa, that is covered by grass but has few trees" (2010: 1312). Thus, a savannah is a favorable place for the challenges of climate change to prosper if nothing is done. What is interesting in the context of this second section is to make available the responsibility of the political leaders of the fictive Republic of Kangan in making of Abazon a savannah. In fact, it is Abazon which is referred to in the novel as "wild savannah" (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 125, 210). Therefore, the ideological implication of the savannah in the novel is synonymous with the punishment Sam, the President, prescribed to Abazonians for having refused to elect him for life. Through the character of the Chief of Abazon delegation, readers are made to understand that:

When we were told years ago that we should vote for the Big Chief to rule for ever...Because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matte ris clear to you or not (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 126-127).

This passage confirms that the sufferences Abazonians are undergoing are the direct result of their “no” to the referendum of the government. Sam, in his desire to hang on to his power through a referendum for life presidnt (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 147), decides that he wants to become President for life, a position unheard of in their nation’s history. This move requires a nationwide plebiscite but Abazon, one of the regions in Kangan, rejects the notion of putting Sam in power for the rest of his life. In response to their refusal, he deprives the region of his support during a drought in the hope that this would break their spirit. His embargo forces the region to send representatives to the capital to plead for their cause and get the necessary supplies. Sam however mistakenly suspects the mission of mercy to be a ruse, thinking that they might be planning a revolt. The government in *Anthills of the Savannah* faces the consequences of climate change as shown in the wild savannah of Abazon. For instance, there is draught, no rain, no harvest and no water for people and animals. The immediate consequence is political demonstration of Abazon’s inhabitants. As such, the politicians who thought of punishing that region which refused to elect Sam for life can have neither rest nor peace at all since demonstrators are numerous and are compared with anthills in a savannah. This is a metaphorical title since men are likened with anthills to put emphasis on the great number of demonstrators and at the same time it shows how all the population disagrees with the government. The following extract is illustrative for this purpose:

It was in the ensuing reverie that Chris, gazing out into the empty landscapes, had become aware of the anthills...It was Braimoh who first drew their attention to a large crowd on the road half-a-kilometer or so ahead. Almost simultaneously everybody in the bus seemed to have become aware of the spectacle so unusual and so visible in that flat, treeless country (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 211).

Furthermore, ecocritical readers may notice that the environment in *Anthills of the Savannah* is that which suffers the damages of climate change with a pitiless sun and draught that create misfortune for the people of Abazon. According to the narrator:

Beyond that dried up river there was hardly a yard of transition; you drove straight into scrubland which two years without rain had virtually turned to desert. The air current blowing into the bus seemed to be fanned from a furnace. The only green things around now were the formidably spiked cactus serving as shelter around desolate clusters of huts and, once in a while in the dusty fields, a fat-bottomed baobab tree so strange in appearance that one could easily believe the story that elephant looking for water when they still roamed these parts would pierce the crusty bark of the baobab with tusk and suck the juices stored in the years of rain by the tree inside its monumental bole (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 208-209).

Here, it is a whole picture of wild-like nature of Abazon which is portrayed to readers. With no watter, people could not even plant trees to protect themselves from climate change and the harshness of sun. Rather than a symbol of brightness and hope, the heat of the sun can be seen as a means of oppression for the people of Abazon, who have been suffering from a drought. What is more, no life is possible without

water and to prevent the Abazonians from having access to water is an extremely difficult situation man can cope with. At the same time, it addresses consequences of climate change and implicitly indicates that through these descriptions, Chinua Achebe urges humanity to take issue related to environment and climate change very seriously.

## Conclusion

All things considered, this essay has demonstrated that the religious relevance of environment in *Things Fall Apart* has greatly impacted Umuofians' determination to protect their environment to which they devote much regards and worship. I discovered that the fear of the forces of nature has greatly contributed to the preservation of environment and what is more, it endows Umuofians with an early ecological consciousness. This does not mean that, trees were not cut at that time. Here, I found that the fear of the forces of nature becomes a strategic narrative style in the hands of the author to promote environmental preservation since trees were not cut at random but for agricultural and religious needs only. This study therefore suggests that African religious perception about environment should be perpetuated out here in our societies in order to raise an ecological consciousness among individuals. Another major finding is that, while Achebe portrays characters in *Things Fall Apart* to whom environment preservation holds dear, he presents in *Anthills of the Savannah* a political regime which is mindless of the protection of environment for it has no political program in this sense. The social relevance of this study is to urge governments develop a clear policy for environmental protection. It therefore, contributes in the resolution of problems of climate change and environmental crisis.

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