

People and Place: A Comparative Ecocritical Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Rajam Krishnan's *When the Kurinji Blooms*

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Abstract: Growing concern for the rapid environmental disruption paved way for a new theory called Ecocriticism at the end of twentieth century. The theory has been employed to analyze literary texts in relation to the physical environment and its disintegration. With degradation of the environment, tribal people are also subjugated as the colonial powers take charge in the respective novels. The chosen novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *When the Kurinji Blooms* relate man's interaction with surrounding environment and its importance in tribal community. The African novel and Tamil novel present harmonious communal lifestyles that are disrupted deeply paving way for severe damage. Tribal community of Africa and Tamil are living in lieu with environment but they are overpowered by British rule. Both the novels portray the essentiality of natural milieu where they are destroyed with the progress induced by the foreign administration. With increasing changes, novelists establish disintegration of underprivileged people along with nature sharing the commonality of environmental crisis. By comparing the novels, suppression of tribal people and environment is presented through ecocritical analysis.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, deep ecology, tribal people, environmental damage, African and Tamil novel.

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Introduction

Literary theory is the body of ideas and methods with underlying principles to understand literature. The contemporary problem of environmental crisis paved way for emergence of a new theory called "Ecocriticism". This field of criticism also known as literary ecology or environmental literary studies emerged in the late twentieth century as a response to the environmental movements of 1960s and 1970s in the field of humanities. The term was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." This theory explores the association of text, author and entire earth as the world. Eventhough appreciation of environment in literature existed, it gained critical stance as a new field with conferences, books and organizations in the late twentieth century. In view with ecocriticism, chosen novels are studied. Comparison of the novels, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Rajam Krishnan's *When the Kurinji Blooms* portray the relationship between the characters in the novels and the physical environment. African fiction, *Things Fall Apart* considers nature as an integral element throughout the novel, where people of Umuofia village establish close association with the physical environment. The African tribal people live harmoniously with nature. Similarly, Tamil fiction *When the Kurinji Blooms* translated by Uma Narayanan and Prema

Seetharam stresses vividly the importance of the natural world of the Nilgiri hills. Baduga tribe is in symbiotic relationship with mountainous nature. Bonding with the external environment, nature's role as the constituent part of the daily life, cultural coexistence with milieu contribute to the ecocritical stance of the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *When the Kurinji Blooms*.

Physical setting plays a major role in both novels. 'Place' forms an important part in relating environment with literature. Environmental literature with its ecological underpinning concentrates on location of place as it shows continuity, identity and eco consciousness being interrelated to human beings. Tribal people are place centric because they are living in it for centuries together. They gain knowledge about the place from their respective ancestors. Indigenous societies are commonly rich in their environmental awareness and are always nature oriented. Jonathan Bate, a well-known ecocritic shares that a place is imbibed with the historical value along with the collective memory of the community. (Bate J, 2000). So, the tribal people are completely attached with their respective places which hold many noteworthy events of their lives. The Umuofia village forms a significant part of the protagonist Okonkwo who grows attached to the soil and the culture of their tribe. Umuofio is powerful among other neighboring villages because the village is gifted with all the

necessities. Okonkwo is the person who sets the rules for fellow agrarian tribal neighbours based on nature-oriented practices.

Rajam Krishnan portrays the evolution of Maragathamalai where the protagonist Jogi is born and raised. Maragathamalai is located in Nilgiri Hills and it is homeland for the traditional Baduga tribe.

The *hatti*, a settlement perched on the hill, was his very own, his birthplace. The *hatti* was protected on three sides by hills-except on the south, where a maze of forests surrounded by shoals stretched endlessly, keeping at bay the noise and clamour of the outside world, its colours, scents and artificial glitter. This *hatti* in the midst of emerald peaks was called Maragathamalahatti or emerald mountain settlement. (Krishnan, 1963/2013, p. 15-16)

The respective novels showcase the bounteous nature and fertile land. Agriculture is the prime occupation of both indigenous communities. Tilling the land makes the individuals realize the importance of soil and the generous characteristic of mother nature. The protagonists form an inseparable bond with their birthplace and land. Protagonists of both the novels, Okonkwo and Jogi are in a culture that teaches to value and respect the nature of the earth. Umuofia and Maragathamalai are centre of all actions in the novels. Indigenous tribal people live in a community supporting one another where they help each other in agricultural activities. Umuofia village and Maragathamalai as the places of the respective characters play an important role in shaping their identity as the person and farmers. Val Plumwood is of the opinion that, "Developing a politics and ethics of place has great potential to clarify, focus and connect environmental and ecojustice concerns" (Plumwood V, 2003). People and place are interconnected which is very important in sustainable living.

Umuofia village has developed ethics of their own where Okonkwo is punished for violating it. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. (Achebe C, 1994)

Umuofia village observes a week of peace for healthy growth of crops so that the people will have good harvest. Okonkwo is respected among the villagers but when he disobeys the rule he is punished. The tribe shows respect to earth as Goddess and hence village as the place is cordial with the nature. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental literature constructs places in a particular way not just by naming the objects, but by emphasizing the process of how such texts portray place attachment.

Maragathamalai in *When the Kurinji Blooms* is abound with *kurinji* flowers which blossoms only once in twelve years. Jogi as a young boy wanders around the mountain and it inspires him throughout the life. Jogi's father Lingayya prays to morning sun regularly for the well being of the humans. The mountain plays important role in turning Jogi as industrious farmer in his later years. Both the novels portray place as essential element of the protagonist's life. Thus, through attachment with place the tribal people become aware of their immediate surrounding and they are environmentally viable and place consciousness becomes imbibed within them.

Things Fall Apart portrays Umuofia villagers' affiliation with the natural world. They consider earth as Goddess Ani which they pray and also thank for providing food.

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth. The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before. (Achebe C, 1994)

Deep Ecology is one of the environmental movements found by Arne Naess and George Sessions. It portray the platform, which describes the inter-related factual and normative claims about humans and their relations with the rest of nature. *When the Kurinji Blooms* elaborates Maragathamalai where the Baduga people live in communion with nature. "All those who belonged to the *hatti* had lived graciously and in unity, like a single family! They had worked hard, enjoyed the fruit of their labour, shared each other's joys and sorrows, and eaten together" (Krishnan, 1963/2013, p. 166). They even consider nonhumans as part of their world. Cow herd is kept clean and milking it is considered sacred ritual. Their culture respects nature and lives in organic way with the surrounding environment. Deep ecologists also consider harmonious living with nonhuman world. "The environment that surrounds us should be treated as just as much an integral part of our identity as our family, community and our culture" (Forsthye M, 2003). Their cordial relationship with nature is broken when the colonial British people start taking decision for the tribal people.

The relationship between the people and nature exists in an amiable manner as both the African tribe and the Baduga tribe consists in their culture as part of coexistence with the wilderness. But with interference from colonial powers the system and belief begin changing gradually. British people believe their sense of superiority and try to change the agrarian lifestyle of the tribal people. Colonial powers violate the norms and disintegrate the people along with nature. Deep ecologists believe the rise of anthropocentrism as cause of drifting of people away from nature.

Anthropocentrism names any stance, perception or conception that takes the human as centre or norm. An 'anthropocentric' view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human, for instance as a resource for economic use, or as the expression of certain social or cultural values. (Clark T, 2014)

With Christian missionaries entering the Umuofia village, they change the perception that nature is God and the value system of the African tribe. Deep ecologists also believe that division of man and nature lie in the Western thought where the superiority of human mind leads to anthropocentrism. Westerners subjugate the tribal through anthropocentric thought leading to loss. Similarly in *When the Kurinji Blooms* people instead of cultivating rice crops start planting tea for money. The British colonizers introduced tea plantations and thereby turned tribal individual's interest in the cash crops. "Those who planted tea and coffee and employed others to look after the crops has no respect for the land. They made money to enjoy themselves in Othai and Coimbatore." (Krishnan,

1963/2013, p. 213). The agricultural pattern drastically changes both in *Things Fall Apart* and *When the Kurinji Blooms*. Most of the tribal people in Umuofia and Margathamalai involve in planting cash crops. Changing the cultivating pattern of the tribe leads to environmental degradation. Increasing influence of the colonialist on the primitive tradition of the African tribe and the Baduga tribe bring about distancing from the natural world. With increased environmental damage, the tribal people wanted to work under British people for their employment. Thus, they become suppressed and dependent on Britain officials forgetting their old natural bond with nature.

Though the materialization process influence the people, protagonists Okankwo and Jogi continue to follow the tradition and values. They work as farmers in the land and try to fight against the alienation from the land. They also detest the British administration and try to stand their own ground as tribal individuals. The land forms part of their identity and they maintain it till the end. Both the novels describe the importance of the tradition and deep ecologists also opine that “minority tradition” is essential to return back to nature. Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* bring out the essence of nature, tradition of Nigerian tribe and alienation process of the people after colonization in the novel. Ecocritically the novel brings on the distanced relationship of the people from the wilderness which exists as part of the society. Environment and African tribe are subjugated under colonial power. Similarly, *When the Kurinji Blooms* brings out the changes that the Baduga tribe of the Maragadhamalai people undergoes through process of modernization. Baduga tribe except Jogi becomes suppressed by planting tea as cash crop. Their modernization under Britain rule has lead to disintegration of environment along with their traditional lifestyle.

From self sufficiency and modest living with nature the tribes undergo drastic change where the power of money with advent of industrialization that turns out the people from its immediacy to wilderness. Comparison of the novels, prove the distancing of people is increasing with modernity bringing marked changes to the indigenous cultures. Tribal people in both the novels lose their traditional communal living and become servants to foreign administration. The protagonists Okankwo and Jogi fight against the colonial powers and continue to perform agrarian activities in accordance with their ancestral practices. Indigenous society will continue to thrive only through sustainable living following their tradition and culture that maintains close communion with nature as shown through the life of the protagonists. The ecocritical analysis of the novels shows the inevitability to continue to follow the tradition to continual well-being of the human and natural world around the globe.

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