

Ecological Memory and Indigenous Knowledge in the Colonial Encounter: A Comparative Study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract- This paper focuses on the relationship between ecological memory, indigenous knowledge systems, and the colonial discourse in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This paper highlights the fact that the discourse of colonialism disrupts the ecological continuity by destroying the connection of indigenous people with the land, whereas postcolonial stories try to restore cultural and environmental memories. With a focus on postcolonial ecocriticism, this paper attempts to analyse the representation of land in both literary works as the land is presented as not just the geographical location but also as the place of cultural identity, history, and ecology. Modern ecocriticism stresses the fact that colonialism causes lasting ecological destruction and epistemic violence resulting in the reconfiguration of indigenous knowledge system about the environment (Adugna & Hailu, 2024).

Index-Terms: Ecological memory, Indigenous knowledge, colonial encounter, ecocriticism, postcolonial literature

I. INTRODUCTION

However, the relationship between colonialism and environmental transformation has emerged as one of the key topics in modern literature and culture studies. Although early postcolonial analysis paid attention mainly to questions related to identity, language, and representation, modern research has enlarged the scope of the discipline, including ecological issues, according to which colonialism should be viewed as not only political and cultural but also as environmental phenomenon (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). Thus, literature becomes one of the most

important means by which ecological memory and Indigenous knowledge systems can be erased, distorted, or reconstructed.

By ecological memory is meant a set of processes that enables landscapes to preserve the imprint of certain historical events, environmental changes, and human relations within particular landscapes. Ecological memory has a lot in common with Indigenous knowledge systems which are based on deep and long-lasting connections between communities and environments.

This study analyzes two classic texts of English literature, namely *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899) and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1958). They constitute two diametrically different approaches to narration in the context of the colonial encounter. While Conrad's novel demonstrates the European imperial view of Africa as an enigmatic and resourceful place, Achebe's work seeks to restore the indigenous identity of Africans and recreate their disrupted precolonial ecological and cultural systems.

The thesis statement of this paper is that colonialism is an ecological system of domination that disrupts the indigenous ecological memory of the colonized people while simultaneously exercising epistemic violence against them. While Achebe's narration restores the indigenous ecological memory of Africa, Conrad's one uncovers the violence of the imperialist expansion through Eurocentric prism.

The recent research into ecocriticism has increasingly focused on the idea that the colonial period has to be regarded as a basic feature of the modern environmental catastrophe ("Slow violence" by Nixon, 2011). The present research explores this point further by introducing ecological memory as an intermediate notion between environmental history and postcolonial identity construction.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism is an emerging discipline that blends ecological criticism and postcolonialism to study how colonial systems define ecological stories. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) suggest that colonial discourses tend to define colonized landscapes as vacant or idle in order to legitimize exploitation and alteration of the environment.

Such a notion is highly important when discussing *Heart of Darkness* since the African scenery appears time and again as the place of darkness and mystery, available to be penetrated by imperialism. As an example, one may speak about the Congo River that performs a geographical function as well as symbolic path to imperialism and breakdown.

2.2 Ecological Violence and Colonialism

Ecological violence is the term used to define the destruction of natural environments through extraction, deforestation, and exploitation during colonial times.

In colonial texts, such acts of ecological violence have been rendered acceptable through the use of dehumanizing language against the land and the indigenous population. There have been several arguments presented lately that such erasure is extended even to ecological systems of knowledge among the indigenes (Whyte, 2018).

2.3 Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) are seen as epistemological alternatives to the Western scientific and capitalist worldviews. IKSs are characterized by relational ontologies that see humans, land, and non-human entities as inter-related.

In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe illustrates a pre-colonial Igbo society that is rooted in the ecological and agricultural rhythms of nature and the spiritual geography of its environment. According to Irele (2000), Achebe's portrayal subverts colonial representations through its restoration of Indigenous environmental complexity.

2.4 Research Gap

While many scholars have researched the works of Conrad and Achebe individually and even made comparative analyses from a postcolonial point of view, there is still an aspect missing from bringing together the concept of ecological memory and indigenous knowledge in one coherent framework of analysis.

The current study will address this issue through the exploration of the workings of ecological memory as a mechanism of forgetting and remembering in colonial and postcolonial texts.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework that draws on postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and Indigenous studies. It seeks to explore the functioning of colonial discourse, which is not only cultural and political but also ecological – as a way through which land, memories, and knowledge systems are transformed. This framework comprises three distinct conceptual pillars: ecological memory, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the colonial encounter as epistemological and environmental formation.

3.1 Postcolonial Ecocriticism as an Interdisciplinary Lens

The term postcolonial ecocriticism comes about as a result of the fusion of environmental humanities and postcolonial studies in a bid to solve the problem of the historic link between imperialism and ecological change. As noted by Huggan and Tiffin (2015), the language of colonialism presents colonized environments as being "empty," "wild," or "undeveloped." This is one way of justifying exploitation of resources and the environment.

Here, literature acts as a means through which environmental ideologies are created and negotiated. Colonialist literature tends to naturalize domination in that landscapes are presented as empty spaces waiting for European modernity. On the other hand, postcolonial literature subverts such domination by reinscribing the connections that indigenous populations have with their lands.

It is for this reason that postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to undermine the dichotomy between nature and culture since environmental degradation cannot be separated from colonialism. This dissertation utilizes this approach to examine how both Conrad and Achebe portray the landscape as an epistemological space under dispute.

3.2 Ecological Memory: Land as a Site of Historical Inscription

The theory of ecological memory is important in the context of this research. The theory of ecological memory is based on the idea that landscapes contain information about the history of the cultural and environmental change. Unlike ordinary memory, which is understood as human cognition and reflection, ecological memory includes the material aspect of memory since the land becomes a repository of human and non-human interactions.

In the context of colonialism, ecological memory becomes erased due to the process of extraction, displacement, and epistemic erasure. While the colonial regime transforms the landscape physically, it also rewrites the meaning associated with them, replacing the history of indigenous people with the story of imperial domination.

The Congo in *Heart of Darkness* becomes a site where ecological memory is overshadowed by abstract imperial discourse. The river is seen as an exploitable path, while the land is drained of any epistemological significance to the Indigenous community. In contrast, in *Things Fall Apart*, ecological memory is encoded into agricultural practices, traditional connections with land, and spiritual geography where land is not just a material object but a historical living memory.

According to recent environmental humanities literature, ecological memory is vital for interpreting changes in the environment through time, particularly in postcolonial situations when the experience of traumatic events is imprinted on both the human and natural environments (Nixon, 2011; Whyte, 2018).

3.3 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Epistemology

IKS can be considered an environmental epistemology based on experience, culture, and relational ontology. In contrast to Western scientific traditions, which tend to isolate people from nature, relational epistemologies stress interconnection among people, land, animals, and spirits. This relational approach is crucial for grasping the environmental ethics of the pre-colonial society that is depicted in "*Things Fall Apart*." Land is not considered an inanimate matter; rather, it is considered a sacred object within the social/spiritual framework.

Farming traditions, seasonal rites, and ancestor worship are all aspects of ecology as an outlook.

As explained by scholars within Indigenous studies, these epistemologies have been historically marginalized or erased through the colonial epistemic violence that replaces the relational ecological epistemology with the capitalist extraction logic (Whyte, 2018). The colonization process does not just involve the cultures but also the environment.

On the other hand, colonial discourse, in this case the work of Conrad, represents a Eurocentric epistemology in which the land is seen through its practicality, control, and economic value.

3.4 The Colonial Encounter as Ecological and Epistemic Disruption

For the purposes of this paper, the colonial encounter is neither defined as a single historical event nor simply as the result of a single confrontation; rather, the colonial encounter is a structural dynamic of power based on both material and symbolic aspects of colonialism.

In terms of ecocriticism, the colonial encounter is an ecological one that transforms landscapes, biodiversity, and sustainable practices through the process of colonization. In terms of postcolonial theory, the colonial encounter is an epistemic one that demystifies Indigenous ways of knowing while valorizing Western ones.

According to Edward Said, the construction of the “Orient” in colonial discourse involves the formation of its image of an object of knowledge and domination. Homi K. Bhabha pays attention to the ambivalent nature of colonial discourse which implies the incomplete nature of domination and the emergence of cultural hybrids due to that reason. Frantz Fanon focuses on the violence caused by colonialism and the way colonial domination changes both land and subjectivity.

In this regard, ecological memory and Indigenous knowledge can be interpreted as acts of resistance.

3.5 Conceptual Integration

The use of the above theoretical strands together helps to analyze colonial literature on multiple levels. Ecological memory gives the time dimension by connecting past environment with current representation. Indigenous knowledge brings the epistemological dimension that questions western paradigms. The colonial encounter forms the structural and historical context within which all this takes place.

This theoretical framework helps to go beyond textual analysis and look at literature as the meeting point of epistemological and ecological systems. This theoretical framework transforms *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* from being just literary texts into being environmental archives.

IV. ANALYSIS OF *HEART OF DARKNESS* (JOSEPH CONRAD)

4.1 The Congo as an Ecological Site of Extraction

The Congo River is more than a geographic place in *Heart of Darkness*; it is an ideological landscape created by the desires and knowledge of imperialism. The African terrain is portrayed by Conrad in such a way that it appears to be both overpowering and incomprehensible from the perspective of the European, a move that represents the practice of producing “otherness” in colonial literature.

The physical and mental experience of Marlow’s voyage upstream is depicted in terms of both landscape and disorientation. It is “like a snake uncoiled” as it moves “into the immense darkness,” an image that converts the geographic place into a scary and confusing symbol (Conrad, 1899/2007). It is a loaded image because it expresses the colonial fantasy of seeing African nature as both threatening and controllable.

The ecological environment is both being plundered and stripped of all its Indigenous significance. Europeans are invariably associated with the decaying industries and destroyed ecology. The description of “devilry of lingering starvation” and the machines left behind indicates the disturbance of the ecological system caused by colonization.

In this regard, from the viewpoint of eco-postcolonialism, this refers to the notion of “slow violence,” as described by Nixon (2011). It is about gradual environmental degradation which is part of imperial discourse and thus becomes invisible to it.

4.2 Ecological Memory and the Erasure of Indigenous Presence

Ecological memory in *Heart of Darkness* is characterized predominantly by its absence. The native presence takes the form of fragments, silences, and objectivization. The African landscape is not made to “speak” in the novella from its epistemological standpoint; rather, it is perceived through the lens of European consciousness.

Perhaps one of the most quoted phrases in the novella: “The horror! The horror!” can be interpreted not only as the moment of Kurtz’s breakdown, but also his experience of the effects of ecological and moral degradation caused by colonial exploitation (Conrad, 1899/2007).

Conrad’s construction of Africa using Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism is quite appropriate here in that the African landscape remains unknowable to be governed only via the interpretive authority of Europe. It becomes what Said (1978) calls the “imaginative geography” of space where representation overrides reality.

Eco-memory of Conrad’s text is thus quite paradoxical: the land remains haunted by violence, but the memory of such violence gets misrepresented or even suppressed by colonial discourse.

4.3 Indigenous Absence and Epistemic Violence

One of the major problems in the narrative of Conrad is the deliberate lack of Indigenous epistemology. Very few African individuals are represented with their language or concepts; when they do appear, they are described through dehumanized representations.

It is well-known that Achebe strongly criticizes such depictions by saying that Conrad portrays Africa as “a metaphysical battleground from which all recognizable humanity has been stripped away” (Achebe, 1977).

For a postcolonial ecocritical analysis, such an absence implies ecological epistemic violence since it involves not just the destruction of the land, but the destruction of knowledge about it as well.

V. ANALYSIS OF *THINGS FALL APART* (CHINUA ACHEBE)

5.1 Land as Ecological Memory and Cultural Identity

Unlike Conrad, Achebe uses land as an embodiment of ecological memories and cultural identities. Land in *Things Fall Apart* is neither vacant nor unstructured; it is rather a structured environment built around rituals, agriculture, and ancestral relations.

The story begins with the presentation of the reputation of Okonkwo and the agricultural background of Igbo society. Yam farming is not only economic production but rather an expression of ecology: “Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (Achebe, 1958/1994). Such statements illustrate a structured ecological epistemology where agriculture has much to do with gender and hierarchical relations and the ecological processes.

In contrast to the fragmented landscape presented by Conrad, Achebe creates an ecologically coherent Igbo society where seasonal festivities, ancestral cults, and farming practices exemplify something that can be called Indigenous ecological memory.

5.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Order

The story by Achebe shows that indigenous knowledge is not backward, as suggested by colonialist discourse, but advanced. The village system follows ecological rules regarding the management of land and spiritual balance.

For instance, the goddess of the earth called Ani is responsible for ensuring ecological and moral equilibrium. The land is sacred, and any disturbance in ecological equilibrium is considered a spiritual one. This notion is consistent with the idea of relational ontology discussed in modern studies of indigenous populations, whereby people belong to an ecological community rather than controlling it (Whyte, 2018).

This work by Achebe challenges the colonial epistemology in that there is a developed environmental ethic inherent in indigenous cosmivision.

5.3 Colonial Disruption and the Breakdown of Ecological Memory

This is because the advent of European colonialism marks an interruption of the ecological system. Missionaries and colonial officials do not only reshape the political system; they reconfigure the land system and the ecological system itself.

This is because desecration of the sacred forest, imposition of foreign religion, and reshaping of the authority system contribute to disrupting the Indigenous memory of ecology. The land, which was part of the spiritual and agricultural continuum, now becomes an ideological battleground.

Achebe expresses this rupture through the steady breakdown of the socio-ecological order of Umuofia. "*Things Fall Apart*" is not only an expression of cultural destruction but also the destruction of the ecological order.

Using an eco-postcolonial lens, this shows how colonialism interferes with environmental relations to create ecological imbalance.

VI. COMPARATIVE ECO-POSTCOLONIAL DISCUSSION

These two texts, when read side by side, show the emergence of two different epistemologies of the land.

While Conrad presents his view of the African land through an imperial perspective, thus turning it into an ecological abstraction, Achebe allows land to reclaim its role in cultural memory and environmental ethics.

The difference serves to point out the main premise of the research at hand: colonialism is not only a political structure but also an ecological and epistemological reworking. The former involves erasure of the Indigenous ecological memory system in favor of extractive and capitalist reason.

The colonial encounter, thus, becomes a meeting ground for two different environmental epistemologies, one extractive and representational, the other relational and mnemonic.

VII. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: ECOLOGY, MEMORY, AND COLONIAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

In the comparative study of *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, an essential difference emerges in terms of land, knowledge, and memory in the experience of the colonial encounter. Although both works deal with the implications of imperialism, the epistemology in which they are based is essentially different and defines their understanding of ecological reality.

Thus, in Conrad's novel, the land of Africa becomes visible through the eyes of a European imperialist who makes it fragmented, unrecognizable, and "dark." This representation is not a

mere description; on the contrary, it has an ideological dimension as it demonstrates the colonially-produced space that has been deprived of its Indigenous significance and reinterpreted as a source of extraction and projection of one's psychology (Said, 1978).

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, builds a model of land as an ecological and cultural system that is structured. Igbo land is active and structured and is involved with social and spiritual practices. Cycles, ceremonies, and ancestor ties exemplify what this paper calls ecological memory, which is a model where the land preserves the history and culture of people for future generations. As opposed to Conrad's broken ecosystem, Achebe's world is holistic, relational, and epistemically cohesive.

This distinction illustrates one major conflict in the colonial discourse that is the opposition of extractive and relational models of the world. Colonial epistemology, as seen in Conrad's work, is based on control, classification, and extraction from the environment. Indigenous epistemology, as illustrated in Achebe's work, is built around sustainability and ethics.

In such a light, colonialism is an ecological discontinuity which reshapes the earth into a system of exploitation and at the same time destroys the Indigenous environmental epistemology. It corresponds to Nixon's (2011) notion of "slow violence" in which environmental destruction takes place gradually and covertly through the political and economic systems.

Moreover, the Indigenous epistemology disrupts the epistemic hegemony of modern Western epistemology because it provides an alternate way of perceiving the human-earth relationship. According to Whyte (2018), Indigenous epistemology is not an extra knowledge system, but rather an ontology based on relationality and accountability to the earth.

Therefore, the colonial encounter in both cases is not merely historical but epistemological and ecological as well.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this investigation, it has been analyzed how ecological memory, Indigenous knowledge and colonial representations interact in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Using a postcolonial ecocriticism approach, it has been proved how colonialism is not only an environmental but also an epistemic system of domination.

It turns out that Conrad's story describes the process of the disappearance of the Indigenous ecological presence via the imperial abstraction, whereas Achebe's story describes the restoration of ecological memory through the incorporation of the land into cultural, spiritual and agricultural systems.

As used in the current analysis, ecological memory serves as a means of connecting environmental history with cultural representation. Ecological memory draws attention to how land is used as an archive of violence committed during colonization as well as the resilient

spirit of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous ways of knowing serve as an epistemology that stands against extractive logics prevalent in the Western world.

Further research might build upon this paper through use of Anthropocene, climate justice, or energy humanities in order to delve into the long-term ecological impacts of colonialism. Comparative analysis using postcolonial texts may be another way forward.

In conclusion, this paper maintains that literature is not merely a mirror of ecology and colonialism; rather, literature is a place where environmental memory and epistemology are actively created and preserved.

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