

Re-envisioning Ecofeminism through a Comparative Study of *Things Fall Apart* and *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, not only redefines the analogous relation between women and nature but also offers a new critical paradigm to study patriarchal protocols of subjugating women and nature homogenously. Achebe highlights the parallels between women and nature in terms of fertility and reproduction in *Things Fall Apart* through the characters of Ani, the earth goddess, and Ezeani, the goddess' priest. Similarly, Ammu suffers from environmental degradation and patriarchal tyranny in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This paper shows how these two fictional narratives demonstrate that the ecological imbalance and the damaged surrounding equally influence the lives of women and create a sense of waste and inadequacy in their psyche. It also takes a different stance as it critiques ecofeminism's narrow focus on the interconnectedness between a specific gender and nature, while reassessing how this theory fails to account for other important social issues. When we are equating women with nature, we are unconsciously accepting their inferior positions, placing them in a rigid boundary, defining and minimizing their roles, judging them without a comprehensive social context, generalizing their attributes, hence, nullifying their individuality. Considering these broader concerns, this paper revisits the oversimplification of intricate gender relations and formation of linear narratives of women.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, gender relations, women, nature

Introduction: There has always been a longstanding relationship between women and the natural world. This affiliation can also be ideological in a sense that it justifies and normalizes women playing no other roles other than being breeders, sustainers, nurturers and preservers – all the positive and productive aspects that are in alignment with nature. These romanticized inclinations not only offer a linear paradigm of women-nature relation, but also overlook the negative and destructive aspect of nature as “nature can also be identified with a disorderly woman who brings plagues, famines, tempests.” [1] Associating some traditional aspects with a specific gender is always problematic because association and identification are not synonymous. This over-identification certainly over-privileges the experiences of women by ‘Othering’ man in this case – hence regenerating the gender bias and legitimizing the perpetuation of domination. Women, shouldering the role of the ‘mother-earth’ for too long, have been left with no other alternatives for progress, self-improvement and evolution. Ecofeminism's narrow focus and reductionist approach fails to capture the complexity of environmental problems and the immutable norms of society.

Discussion on *Things Fall Apart*: Radical ecofeminism challenges the conventional gender construct of ‘woman’ and ‘ecology’ by re(envisioning) and re(valuing) the feminine qualities that are culturally associated with women such as care, body and emotions. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* women are seen to be doing household duties like cleaning, cooking, raising children within the Igbo society's traditional framework. Okonkwo's first wife plays a maternal role, showers compassion, kindness, and support not only for her own children but also for others within the household, such as Ojiugo's children and also to the foster child, Ikemefuna. She was “very kind to him and treated him as one of her own children” [2]. When Ikemefuna “went behind the house and began to vomit painfully. Nwoye's mother went to him and placed her hand on his chest and on his back” [2]. It shows how thoughtfully she maintains the well-being of the family. She does not have any central authority over the family, but she tries to play the motherly role as earnestly as possible. Despite enduring her husband's thrashings and bitter nature, she never steps back from being a good wife to Okonkwo. She provides undue care and protection to Ojiugo's children when she goes to plait her hair. She is the one who not only feeds but also shields those children and their mother from Okonkwo's rage and fury. In this way, she intends to retain familial and cultural tradition of Igbo society. But the association of the “care-ethic” with one gender deprives readers of any objective analysis of the relation between women and nature. As Christine J. Cuomo resonates—

Caring can also be morally damaging to a moral agent if by caring for someone or something he or she neglects other responsibilities, including responsibilities to self...In fact, female caring and compassion for oppressors are cornerstones of patriarchal systems. Women have forgiven oppressors, stayed with abusive husbands and partners, and sacrificed their own desires because of their great ability to care for others. [3]

In *Things Fall Apart*, the readers cannot ignore the irony of a goddess-centered society of the Igbo. The earth goddess, Ani, was greatly revered by the people of Umuofia. She was the moral compass, ultimate scale for conduct as well as the source of all

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fertility. Apart from her, the priestess of Agbala, Chielo, was a widow with two children in ordinary life. Not to forget the medicines of the tribe— *agadi-nwayi* (one-legged woman) of Umuofia and an old woman with a fan of Umuike. With women occupying such significant roles in the clan, one might easily conclude that women must be regarded very highly in the society. But things are far more complex than this as in the same society, we see women being traded like goods, marriage-worthy women being surveyed for freshness, women being hushed, torn and beaten, women held at gunpoint for simply plucking leaves from trees. However, all these happen in the same space where Ani remains a constant presence, highlighting the fact that it is not really connected with nature, rather it is the culture, social construction and naturalized way of life. No woman in that space is found trying to retaliate or rebel against this repressive system approved by their gods and goddesses.

Okonkwo's behavior towards his daughter, Ezinma, is remarkable. For Okonkwo, she was the boy he never had. So, when Agbala wanted to see Ezinma and sent Chielo to bring her to Umuachi, Ekwefi feared that her daughter would be killed. She could barely follow the possessed priestess and Ezinma but she was willing to fight any god to save her daughter. Helpless at that moment and knowing nothing about what was to happen to her only child that seems to have survived the *ogbanje* curse, Ekwefi found the man she married behind her, with a matchet in his hand "Tears of gratitude filled her eyes. She knew her daughter was safe" (Achebe 96) [2]. The point to be taken here is that Okonkwo has brighter sides or redeeming aspects. We cannot take him for granted as a typical patriarchal figure. In a society where men are measured through hard work, violence and titles, Unoka (Okonkwo's father) did almost nothing to pave the way for Okonkwo. An untitled man, skilled in the art of oratory but only to pile up debts to cash on bottles of palm wine and merrymaking, Unoka was not at all an ideal figure to make an idol out of. It can be said he had the heart of a romantic who lived in the moment and for a change, loved life and music amid war hungry men and their battle cries. Okonkwo despised him with all his heart as Unoka was seen as far from the embodiment of a true man in the eyes of their people. That is why he ruled his house with a heavy hand and was himself ruled by one passion – to hate what his father resembled – all that is *unmanly*.

Okonkwo always felt the horror of the ghost of his father in his marrow. His innate drive to be manly in every aspect springs from the haunting thought of being seen as the reflection of Unoka, which conveys a more realistic explanation for his behavior towards men who lack the manly instincts and women in general. He harbored no active feeling of repugnance, dislike or distaste towards women. Whatever he does ignites from his sole desire to fit into traditional Umuofian culture and society, the fatherland where he wanted to make his mark when his own father missed it. When examined through the lenses of cultural, contextual, religious, and social conventions, ecofeminism reveals its limitations. In "A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism", Huey-I Li draws attention to the dualism prevalent in Chinese culture, where the reverence for nature and the subordination of women are seen as entirely unrelated concepts. The gendered associations that ecofeminism frequently makes between women and nature appear both foreign and irrelevant in Chinese society, because nature is not intrinsically linked to ideas of femininity. This disparity exposes the cultural uniqueness of such ecofeminist frameworks and threatens the notion that the relationship between women and nature is universal or innately natural. [1] Such polarity is also evident in the Igbo tribe: while women are sidelined and often battered over trivial daily spats, men bow down in reverence to the female deities. Therefore, if women and nature were truly interconnected, would it not be that men would completely defy their goddesses? Thus, there is no intrinsic connection between women and nature in Igbo culture. Nature is not being exploited in the same ways women are; their experiences are not directly connected.

Discussion on *The God of Small Things*: In *The God of Small Things*, "Paradise Pickles and Preserves" epitomizes modernization and commercialization of Kerala's economic system, introducing capitalist enterprise which places financial gains and fortunes over ecological concerns. The use of chemicals and waste disposal of the factory multiply pollution and environmental regression in the surrounding area of Ayemenem. Additionally, the use of pesticide in the Ipe family's rice fields promotes this capitalist venture. The wave of capitalism does not even spare the Ipe residence as it undergoes a transformation. The once diverse and thriving environment of the estate deteriorates gradually as the family pursues profit through practices like monoculture, leading to a loss of biodiversity. Both Paradise Pickles and Preserves and the Ipe family's estate serve as symbols of capitalism's wider impact on Kerala's environment and traditional lifestyles. Their actions demonstrate a disregard for the environmental repercussions of unregulated industrialization and commercial expansion, resulting in irreversible destruction to nature and the communities reliant on it. Both men and women have the human curiosity that is essential to technological creation and innovation. It seems that technology is the most effective tool for controlling nature, and harmful technology such as growing pesticide usage and nuclear weapons aggravate ecological issues. It is not possible to connect the advancement of science and technology only to masculine traits. The development of technology in early societies was greatly aided by the contributions of women as domesticators. As Mumford says:

Protection, storage, enclosure, accumulation, continuity—these contributions of neolithic culture largely stem from woman and woman's vocation. In our current preoccupations with speed and motion and spatial extension, we tend to devalue all these stabilizing processes.... But without this original emphasis on the organs of continuity ... the higher functions of culture could never have developed. [4]

Though Chacko was the Man of the House throwing around possessives ("*my pickles, my jam, my curry powders*"), Mammachi was the actual 'Modalali' to whom important information were brought regarding the factory. As stated in *The God of Small Things*, "Whenever anything serious happened in the factory, it was always Mammachi and not Chacko that the news was

brought. Perhaps this was because Mammachi fitted properly into the conventional scheme of things” (Roy 122) [5]. She was the one who perfectly played her role of the actual owner of the business.

Traditional families expect unconditional loyalty and blind reverence from individuals in the family. The Marxist thinker, Louis Allthusser thinks family functions as an ideological state apparatus which indirectly compel the family members to nurse the ideology of ruling class. Mammachi, a stereotypical Indian woman, pledges her whole life to be an ideal wife. She unduly tolerates her husband’s jealousy, vindictiveness, violence without any complaint. Mammachi never feels the urge to untie the knot of suppression. But she remains totally complacent in a phallogocentric world that deprives her of merit, excellence, and articulateness. She loses all her aspirations, gives up her ambitions and hopes, and ultimately shapes herself into the template of traditional family setup. She started her pickle business but could not own it for long, rather she let the business be controlled by her son, Chacko. She cannot accept Ammu for her moral and sexual transgression, for her deviation from the ideal family setup, but she herself justifies Chacko’s sexual indulgence as “Men’s Needs” (Roy 168) [5]. On the other hand, both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma easily dovetail into the suppressive family system that brutally beats Ammu down. Baby Kochamma not only imagines Ammu’s sexual intimacy with Velutha in vivid details, but also compares it to “a dog with a bitch on heat” (Roy 257-258) [5]. This is a typical picture of the double standard morality practiced in traditional Indian families. It is always woman who destroys family name, honor, and dignity while men can show greater laxity towards morality. So, men try to run the whole system in this unjust way and women help them run their placid and unshaken reign. The women who were oppressed once, turn to be oppressors eventually. As an effect of living under an authoritarian roof for a long time, the women become staunch supporters of patriarchal norms and it seems they themselves are the biggest hurdles in their growth and emancipation.

Continuing the charitable efforts for the Paravans initiated by Reverend E. John Ipe, Mammachi exhibits a seemingly more nuanced view of Velutha. She recognizes Velutha’s individual worth beyond his caste, possibly influenced by her own personal struggles and disappointments in life. According to Mammachi, Velutha could have become an engineer if he were not a Paravan. Even after Velutha’s four-year hiatus from Ayemenem, Mammachi reinstates him as the factory carpenter upon his return and places him in charge of general maintenance. However, when confronted with the reality of Velutha’s relationship with her daughter, Ammu, Mammachi does not hesitate to show her true colors. She eventually succumbs to societal pressures and reveals her underlying prejudices, symbolized by her act of spitting in Velutha’s face – “Thick spit. It splattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes” (Roy 284) [5]. The once engineer material Velutha in a moment became nothing but a filthy coolie.

Baby Kochamma’s stance regarding Velutha is considerably more extreme than that of Mammachi. The story of Ammu and Velutha, narrated by Vellya Papen, presents Baby Kochamma with the opportunity of a lifetime to kill two birds with one stone. She wanted to add to God’s punishment of the sinful Ammu who dreamt to have a life without a man. It is evident that Baby Kochamma is trying to justify her role as an oppressor. Additionally, she would love to be the avenger of the humiliation by the men in the march who called her ‘Modalali Mariakutty’ and made her wave their flag. The price she thought should be paid by Velutha as he was present in that march. Later on, Baby Kochamma fabricated Velutha as a “sex-crazed Paravan” who forced himself on “three women alone in a house” (Roy 260) [5]. Her volcanic rage can be captured when she describes Velutha with the details of the man who utterly humiliated her during the march. To quench her thirst for blind vengeance and put the last nail in the coffin, she manipulates the psychology of the twins into identifying Velutha as their kidnapper.

In *The God of Small Things*, women are portrayed as not only displaying aversion and hostility toward their kindreds but also shown as the oppressors and perpetrators of the preceding unjust system. Baby Kochamma loathed the twins for they were just like her reflection in a mirror. She reclined in the darkness without the guiding light of Father Mulligan. But seeing the twins suffer from almost the same fate – being abandoned by their father – fueled her resentment towards them. They were also living under an unauthorized roof periodically pointed out by even the maid of the house. They also had stamps of ‘half-Hindu hybrid’ on their heads to repel any future marital relationship in the community. Their aunt was dedicated to sabotaging their moments of joy when possible. She begrudged the fact that they had each other where she was all alone. She already waved the white flag quite some time ago. But Ammu’s perseverance to weave a life without Baba really irritated her. According to her, there should be no place for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage in her parents’ home (Roy 45-46) [5].

Baby Kochamma always prioritizes the conventions of upper-class society and tries to preserve political and social dissensions of her region. Her mind is crammed by her apprehension of displacement from the mainstream society. So, she clings to the age-old class values and relies solely on her heritage as a source of honor and pride. She has a tragic backstory of unrequited love. Forsaken by Father Mulligan in youth, she became very self-centered. She uses the veneer of Christianity and charitable acts only as a means of appearing to be a genuinely good person in the eyes of people. A woman without a man is basically seen as worthless in patriarchal society, so she strictly maintains the status quo to accommodate herself within the typical framework of society. Baby Kochamma lives so much in the pool of previous memories that she is not in love with Father Mulligan anymore but possessively loves only a glorified memory of him. This character reminds me of another famous character from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Miss Havisham, being jilted by her fiancée, becomes a completely heartless woman. By shutting herself from the world over twenty years, she raises Stella very artfully to seek revenge on men. But she cripples Stella’s natural growth to meet her own end. In the same manner, we find Baby Kochamma in a conspiratorial role in the later stage and sacrifices the untouchable Velutha’s life at the altar of family honor.

There already exists layers of hierarchy in Ayemenem society which perpetuates such dyads as white/black, touchable/untouchable, male/female, adult/children, where first terms are always the privileged ones. The first set of hierarchical dyads springs from unwavering fealty to the colonial masters as the bourgeois section maintains its distinction and supremacy by inculcating the values of western culture. As soon as Margaret and Sophie arrive from England, they are promptly able to draw the attention and pleasure of Ipe family members due to their fair complexion. Keen on adopting an Occidental way of life, Pappachi drives a Plymouth and smokes a cigar. Pappachi, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma instantly become devout anglophiles who take immense pleasure in assimilating the English values, customs and ways of life. Roy's portrayal of the corollary of Christianity on Indian society and British colonization is cynical. The "civilizing" objective of the colonizers drives many touchables and untouchables to convert into Christianity. The British colonizers are gone but the touchables of Indian society have now assumed to play the role of colonizers by brutal oppression of the disenfranchised. So, their assimilation of British ruling methods and their proselytization to Christianity marks the effect of Neocolonialism and the pseudo-growth of Indian society. Each member of the Ipe family is the product of this suppressive system. Being an entomologist, Pappachi once identified a particular moth with dense dorsal tufts. He was enthusiastic and took the subject up with the Department of Entomology's higher authorities in Delhi, but they did not treat him with the respect he deserved. Twelve years later, following Pappachi's retirement, they accepted his explanation but called it after the Acting Director of the Department of Entomology. Pappachi's eventual transformation was a result of the authority's deliberate refusal to acknowledge his contribution and well-deserved acclamation. So, it is evident that Pappachi has also been the victim of an unjust system. Since a victim is bound to ingrain unconsciously the unfair means to lead the rest of the life, Pappachi also ends up being eaten by the evil moth of evil system.

Conclusion: The rhetoric of ecofeminism fails to account for the potential gap between women's interest in environmental regeneration and their ability to turn that enthusiastic urge into meaningful action. It should focus on acknowledging and valuing women's diverse roles in addressing environmental issues rather than romanticizing them. Women are rarely passive victims of environmental hazards; they must be able to transform their own interest and govern natural resources. If we take the issue for granted that women are the only actuators and worthy of restoring nature because of their special sensitivity towards nature, they will again end up cleaning the environmental mess for the world. It is essential not to generalize gender traits and create gender bias in this respect. Embracing diversity and collaboration, regardless of gender, is crucial for environmental restoration and social advancement. Empowering only women in environmental actions means readdressing gender disparities and inequalities. We should have better understanding of how gender intersects, how different groups experience and contribute to environmental problems in their own unique ways.

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