

## Ecofeminism in Selected Works of First Generation Nigerian Female Writers

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### **Abstract**

*The growing interest in literary works has attracted diverse approaches in scholarship. The goal of ecofeminism is the quest for equality for women and environmental justice. The central argument of ecofeminism asserts the connection between the oppression and subordination of women and of nature. The paper examines ecofeminism from the perspective of a culture-centered approach, where ecofeminism view the ecosphere as a binary entity comprising men/women and nature/culture. Thus, the study transcends gender and nature, to the human connections with environmental issues and culture; where patriarchal structures are challenged and transformations are achieved. Varying forms of oppression, subjugation, conflicts of motherhood, tradition and environment are explored. Selected works of first-generation female writers deployed for the study include, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Zaynab Alkali's *Invisible Borders* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods*. These literary works are selected for their thematic affinity with women and ecology and the literary works were written in consonance with colonial discourse and imperialism. Significantly, this study reveals the need to rethink the environment in African history, from new perspectives by conceptualizing woman/nature and culture/nature connections, beginning from earlier works of Nigerian female writers. Qualitative research methods, via a close reading and critical textual analysis, are adopted for the study. The paper concludes that environmental challenges in Nigeria are situated on patriarchal structures and early Nigerian female writers devised libratory strategies to address them in their discourses.*

**Keywords:** Environment, Ecofeminism, Culture, Binary, Nigerian female writers.

### **Introduction**

The growing interest in Ecofeminism in literary works has attracted diverse approaches to the concept. This concept came about in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. Ecofeminism is a social movement that emerged from both political activism, and intellectual critique. It brings together feminism and environmentalism. From the conceptual definition of Ecofeminism, it is an ideology and movement that sees gender equality and social injustice in a larger sense as intrinsically related issues due to the influence of male dominance in the society, Birkeland, (1993: 41).

It helps to unveil the exploitation and destructions of our ecology and its natural resources by developing countries under the disguise of globalization or development. Ecofeminism sees parallelism in oppression of nature by human activity as same with masculine chauvinism in practices and attitudes, which is common in patriarchal society. Hence, it examines the dualistic relationship between nature and women to reveal their parallel and mutually reinforcing oppressive relationship. Buell, (1995: 47).

It argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchal and capitalism, which is an example of how the societal values and ethics are controlled, which is profit-driven, sexist and male-centered. It highlights how the oppressive system work hand in hand to facilitate the exploitation of women and nature. The relationship between women and environment cannot be over emphasized right from the onset of oral African culture, there has been central argument between women and nature due to the oppression, subordination and subjugation of women and the oppression of nature. Therefore, the concept, Ecofeminism, exemplifies the structural imbalances of power in order to foster equitable societies.

The issue of women and nature is widely discussed, not in Nigeria alone, but in various geographical locations around the world. We have writers like Susan Griffin, Val Plumwood, Carol J. Adams and Anne Karpf, and coming down to Africa, there are Ecofeminist writers like Pulma Dineo Qqola, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and many more, which shows that the issue is not a nouveau, it has been since in the African society. Patriarchy, is a known societal "disease", which plague African women. Patriarchy is like a story already known and efforts were not put in place to challenge the societal status quo, until of recent, when there arouse the female literary writers who sensitized the consciousness of the women to stand up and assert their rights, which they had been denied all this while.

The patriarchal structure allowed male hegemony and this led to varying forms of oppression, subjugation and conflicts of motherhood. The environmental challenges which are situated in Nigerian patriarchal structure are the main issue that Nigerian female writers addressed in the selected literary works for this study, which are; *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, *Invisible Borders* by Zaynab Alkali, *Wedlock of the gods* by Zulu Sofola. According to Carolyn Martin Shaw in *Muponde and Taruvinga* (2002:26) state that:

'when women write, they not only create their own stories,  
but by the act of writing they gain authority over their lives'

Ecofeminism also ensure there is feminine and nature liberation from male chauvinism domination and violence and to create an eco-friendly and gender-just world order.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ecofeminism movement emerged in late 1980s in the United States of America. The field of Ecocriticism has newly emerged as an important critical perspective that explains how human beings relate to the environment and how non-humans are presented in fiction. According to Cheryll Glotfelty (1996: xviii), a pioneer in this field, Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Ecocriticism is a concept that examines the interconnectedness of man and nature (Fenton 2008:2). Fenton says that man and nature are inextricably connected.

Ecocriticism was defined by Glotfelty and Fromm as an 'earth centred approach to literary studies (1996: xviii). It places the ecosphere at the center of everything. It considers the environment as part of a system in which humanity exist. It is an 'earth centred' approach that looks at many possible connections between the physical environment and literature.

Kerridge and Sammells (1998), explore ecocriticism in terms of both its earth centredness' and aid in response to the earth's despoliation because to them, due to toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, global warming and oil spills pose a great danger to the ecosphere and through literary texts, reflects how human contribute to environment restoration from a literary perspective.

Ecocriticism is an attempt to read literary and cultural texts from an environmentalist view points to make some difference to the world outside. Buell, (1995:12), viewed nature or the environment as an 'object' material and vulnerable reality and voiced its concern for a'spirit' of commitment to environmentalist praxis.

Muzumdar (2013) opines that nature writings and ecological themes in all literature are the major concern of ecocriticism. Likewise Srilatha (2011), Garrard (2004), also share same view that nature holds an important place in the lives of people, therefore, there is a need to understand the interconnectivity between humans and non-human nature and to raise awareness against environmental problems that disrupt this relationship.

Also, Coupe (2000:705) defines ecocriticism as an approach to literature which considers the relationship between humans and non-human life as representation in literary texts and which theorises about the place of literature against environmental destruction. Here, he questions the role of literature against environment destruction.

Ecofeminism is also a feminist theory that is strongly informed by ecology. First coined by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, Ecofeminism is concerned with the interconnection between the domination and exploitation of women and the domination and exploitation by nature. Ecofeminism is about close connectivity and inseparable bond between women and ecology. When women are subjugated, oppressed and marginalized, nature suffers also. According to King, an Ecofeminist scholar, 'Ecofeminism's challenge of social domination extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, class and nature are mutually reinforcing', (Warren, 1997:21).

Some Ecofeminist scholar like Warren 1997; Howell 1997, Ruether 1992, succinctly sees nature as a feminist issue and Howell in her article "Ecofeminism refers to a feminine theory and activism as informed by ecology", (1997:232). She explores the interconnectedness of ecology and feminism, and explores how male domination of women and nature are interconnected both in cultural ideology and in social structure (1992:2). Van Rune Shiva, is of the view that the world view that causes environmental degradation and injustice is the same world view that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women' (cited in Brinker 2009:1). Also, (Cook 2008) says there is a link between the culture of male domination and the degradation and exploitation of nature.

In order to add to the thoughts of ecofeminist scholars, King (1989) and Birkeland (1993, cited in Howell, 1997) say that for the environment to survive, a social transformation of values that embodies non dualistic and non-hierachial features are oppressive on nature. Birkeland (1993) and King (1989) state that social transformation in Ecofeminism must include intellectual transformation. It uses language to problematise the unjustified domination of women, animals

and nature. It is a new wave in the literary canon. Ecofeminism is a movement that sees connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world, the subordination and oppression of women. It started in the mid 1970s by the French Feminist, Françoise d'Eauboune. It refers to embodiment of how women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to environment pollution (Mellor 1992: Salleh 1997).

Going down African memory lane, it was the advent of the colonialist that further encouraged and gave the patriarchal dominance a great footings in the African society.

According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:30), the colonial systems negatively encouraged the traditional ideologies of male superiority which originally existed in African societies. This Colonialism has brought out the basic sexist tendencies in pre-capitalist Africa. Colonialism empowers African male by exercising authority on the female at home and in their communities because they built their systems of African men's hegemony and marginalized female folk. Thus, women are considered as subordinates because they thought their roles are to nurture children and be involved in domestic chores (Schmidt, E, 1991).

### **Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism pays attention to women's position in culture and society and its goal is to change and transform the oppressive situation of women and advocates for equity for women, (Reddock 1998). It is a complex, multi-faceted movement whose essence is to rebuild and not to destroy the society. Ecofeminism is out to restore pride, dignity and place of women in the history.

An ecocritical reading of literature calls for a paradigm shift from the human-centric to the bio-centric and ecofeministic method will be employed as the interpretive frame work that can unravel both the discourse of the feminine and the politics of its representation with Nigeria history, (Wilson-Tagoe 1997:177).

### **Methodology**

This will be based on close reading of the three selected literary works of the First generation of Nigerian Female writers. Thereby, better insight is given to the relationship between the women and environmental issues, in line with their interconnectedness with each other, using the selected texts. Analytical tools like journals, internet, critical works and research papers will be used for more qualitative information.

### **Discussion**

There is no how the issues of women and the environment will be discussed, without culture.

Environmentalism is about the story of a loss but more expression of anxieties about this loss is not enough, we need some sort of activity, both physical and intellectual to repair it. To bridge the nature-culture, man-environment gap/divide we need a new kind of thought, 'the global reparative thinking, which is an interconnected interdisciplinary way of thinking and feeling. Muzumdar (2013:3).

In addition, Glotfelty asks these questions:

How is nature represented in [literary work], what role does the

physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this [narrative] consistent with ecological wisdom? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In what ways has literacy itself affected human kind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?

In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crises seeping into contemporary literature. (Glotfelty,1996:xix).

### **Efuru**

Efuru, is a novel by Flora Nwapa, published in 1966. The story is based on an old folktale of Igbo people about a woman chosen by the gods. Efuru Ogene is an Igbo woman, the daughter of Nwashike Ogene, a hero and leader of his tribe, who lives in a small village in colonial West Africa. Efuru means 'Daughter of Heaven: they are blessed'. Flora mirrors her as she navigates through her adult life, marriage, motherhood and independence. She is a good wife, submissive, caring and nice to her in-laws and the people of her community. She is an independent -minded woman. She is rich and respected for the economic value she added to her community. It is a foundational novel which expresses the emerging female voice in African Literature. Her female character representation makes it possible to reconfigure women in taking roles as articulate, industrious, self determined and articulate, as against the earlier portrayal of women as second fiddle, inferior, servile, as depicted by male writers.

Viewing through the protagonist, Efuru, as a lens in her community, Flora Nwapa tries to change the distorted image of African women by male writers, who always paint women as second fiddle, people 'to be seen and not to be heard' and totally dependent on men. Therefore, she reverses/changes the gender roles, both societally and maritality in her novel.

### **Women/Culture**

Nwapa depicts a new social order, which supports and encourages women as having upper hand in the society. She presents Men as the weaker sex. Her portrayal shows men as care free, non challant and partially committed to their matrimonial home. This type of attributes is seen in both of her husband's. For example, Adizua, her first husband, he wasn't the one that paid for Efuru's bride price. It was she that paid for it by herself and also gave the money to buy things for entertainment to her father, page 9, 12 and 23:

but your husband must fulfill the customs of our people. It is very important. Our enemies will laugh at us. Tell your husband, he must see your Father when we have enough money to pay the dowry, we shall approach elder men who will help us beg him. You're to give Efuru's father a bottle of schnapps now, Adizua's uncle said Adizua went out, and was making for home, when Efuru called him and gave some money instead.

She is the one that single handedly with the assistance of her mother in-law, bought the items needed for her bride price, page 21

meanwhile, Efuru and her mother in-law went to the market and bought the best kola they could find. Then they went to the shops and bought six

bottles of schnapps. Then they went to a woman near by and bought a big jar of home-made gin.

Adizua 's irresponsible life is further seen again when he eloped with another woman without prior notice to Efuru, page 51 and 52:

You mean Adizua my husband, did not return last night.  
I waited till about midnight and when I did not see him,  
I went to bed,  
'I want my food tonight' Adizua said, Efuru went to the

kitchen and prepared something for her husband. When it was ready, Adizua was called, the room was empty.

During the demise of their daughter Ogonim, Efuru is the only one that takes care of the mourners, with the assistance of her sister in-law, Ajanupu. The death of their daughter didn't bring any remorse for him. He decided to stay with the estranged woman, page 70:

Ogonim's father must be sent for, the corpse will be buried, Ossai,  
get up and be useful, go down to the stream and see if there are  
people going to Ndoni and give them a message for Adizua.

Likewise Gilbert, Efuru's second husband, he too behaved same. When he impregnated another woman, under the pretence of going to trade in Ndoni. Efuru got to know, page 196 and she joyously, accepted the boy.

' How did they settle that problem of Gilbert' son who came  
From Ndoni, She saw a clear resemblance between him  
and her husband and treated them very kindly. Of course,  
she was angry with Gilbert, not because he  
kept the whole thing a secret from her until the week  
the boy was actually coming to visit them.

When Efuru's father died, Gilbert (Eneberi), was absent. It was Efuru and the elders of her family and her community people that gave Nwashike, a befitting burial. This presents him a bad son in-law and this greatly saddens Efuru, page 204:

She was very sad. Gilbert was not at the burial of  
Efuru's father. He was not at home when the old  
man died. He was sent for, but he did not return..

Efuru was able to challenge the culture of her people by striving to live above the structured female subjective life styles which many women in her community lived. She employed her industrial lifestyle to influence her husband's lifestyles, her in-laws and her community

### **Wedlock of the gods**

In this three Acts play, Zulu Sofola presents the obnoxious cultural practice in contemporary African society. Going by the title, it means 'the state of being a married couple voluntarily joined for life or until divorce'. This is in contradiction to Ogwoma and Adigwu's marriage and it led to Ogwoma wanting to break off from the oppression of tradition in a male patriarchal society of the arranged marriage to Adigwu, a rich and older suitor. Sofola presents the title with a symbolical meaning that Ogwoma and Uloko are destined by the gods to marry, but it is

clear evidence that the tradition of the people, due to the poverty of average man, superceded the will of the gods.

### **Culture/Women**

In *Wedlock of the gods*, the obnoxious cultural practice in the contemporary African society is depicted. It is a marriage tragedy between Adigwu and Ogowma. Ogowma was forced by her parents to marry Adigwu, because they needed money (bride price), to take care of her brother who was seriously sick. No respect was accorded to females, they were not treated with high esteem, they are believed to be a means of satisfying their economic thirst or want. That is why they take them as a means of solving the male folk or societal/ economic problem, especially, with the bride price. This economic gain is what the male folks are after, without considering the physical, psychological, social and mental trauma that the female in question undergoes. Ogowma was forced to marry Adigwu, which was against her wish. She was whipped to Adigwu's house, despite her refusal, page 9:

Anwasia: You were forced to marry Adigwu, we all know that, but this pregnancy is not a good thing.

Ogowma: You don't understand how my heart beats.  
Because you were not tied like a goat and  
Whipped along the road to a man you hated,  
You are not able to understand what my heart tells me.

Anwasia: Ogowma, our people say that a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him. Your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother, whom sickness almost killed.  
You should have been happy that your money saved the life of your own brother.

Her parents placed the economic value of the bride price above the joy and fulfillment of their daughter. Ogowma said:

Ogowma: It is one who has never loved who thinks that way.  
I prayed for the past three years for my God to deliver me from this marriage. My prayers were answered, let the rain become fire; Ogowma loves and Ogowma will do it again!  
Ogowma loathe Adigwu, their marriage was a mis- match. Adigwu eventually died and the cause of his death wasn't disclosed, page 7

Odibei: I must find it.

Otubo: come, let us go. You are not well.

Odibei: My son cannot die a shameful death.

Otubo: Come and rest your head. You are worrying too much.  
God gives and God takes away.

Odibei: She must not go free. I must find it. I must find the cause of my son's death.

Culture places custom and tradition above any female's decision maritally. Ogwoma symbolically represents women who are compelled by the society to succumb to societal and marital violence. She saw herself maritally as an unfulfilled woman. Her love is for Uloko and not Adigwu...page 10

Anwasia: Uloko has really blinded you  
Ogwoma: Oh God, Uloko has blinded me.  
I go to the market,  
It is Uloko I see in every stall;  
I go to the farm,  
It is Uloko in every tree;  
The wind blows,  
It is his hands that touch me;  
The birds sing,  
It is his voice I hear;  
Oh God, his child moves in me

Efuru, although from her youthful eyes, was happy that the death of Adigwu had brought a freedom from the coerced marriage that she was forced into. She represents the voice of the maritally oppressed female in African society. She challenged the culture of her people and dared the consequences, although too tragic.

### ***Invisible Borders***

This is a novel by Zaynab Alkali. The novel is otherwise known as 'Novel for girls'. It employs a flashback narrative style. It is a Bildungsroman, which provides insight into culture and gender to confirm the magnitude of women's oppression and dehumanization in a patriarchal society. The Invisible Borders shows the villainy of the male child and how the female becomes a victim of his recklessness show of power. It shows how women suffer in an insufferably patriarchal society, which doesn't give them the right privilege to be who they wanted to be and how they take their destiny into their hands.

### **Women/Culture**

Zaynab mirrors Safia's life as it marches in its own convoluted trajectory from her childhood till marriage. Safia and Sam are the protagonists, who were betrothed by Safia's father, Ma'aji at the ages of 12 years and 16 years respectively...page 23:

Ma'aji looked at Sam the way a father looks at a son and smiled wanly. Sam smiled full-lipped, revealing a set of white regular teeth..... an inexplicable vibration passed between them.... turning to the young man, he said, 'Son, she is only twelve, you are not much older yourself, but fate had brought you together .....in an unsteady voice he said to her, 'I shall take

From the excerpt above, it shows the patriarchal dominance. Before the duo were ripe for marriage, they had been introduced to marriage institution. This is the overriding force that



governed the two of them from that moment and the belief in their culture that since it is Ma'aji that had joined them together, they are definitely joined, not knowing that they are not....page 29

...the love of her life, a husband not destined to be.

The two of them were in the medical school and they were doing greatly, when a bomb fell, detonated and shattered his dreams. Sam was on his second year and 19 years old, while Safia was 15 years old. Sam's undue alliance with Uncle Gaga, (his mentor), who represents an external force that led him to the wayward life. This lifestyle led him to betrayed Safia twice, firstly, when it was believed that he impregnated Samfa,....page 37 and 41

" that Sam in a drunken stupor, accidentally slept with a woman they said is your mother's age mate.... Chima's voice finally touched a remote region in Safia's brain, the denial region. "What? the nursemaid for Dr Maclean's daughters?....the pain around the region of her heart tightened until she could no longer breath. It was then she let out a heart- rending cry that stunned everyone and sent her mother dashing into the room.

Safia was trying to put her past behind her when agreed to marry the cousin of his friend, Halima, Dr Sufyan, when Sam resurfaced and she finally left doctor Sufyan for Sam, only to receive a visitor one day, claiming to be a legal wife of Sam, ten days to her marriage to Sam....page 85

they stared at each other unseeingly. Safia was twenty- six. Aissata was more than a decade older than her.....History had a way of repeating itself " Sam was brought into my division, a division where I headed....." but it was only three years ago we got into a serious relationship" she paused. Safia looked at her steadily and slowly her eyes reverted and rested on the boy.... "Sam's child and....she pointed at her stomach.....she was about eight months gone.... In a daze, Safia had walked back to her room in the hostel.... nothing meant anything anymore. She had walked through similar fire kindled by the same man after eleven years! She felt like the greatest fool that ever lived.

Sam fled to Lagos and sought out his mentor, Uncle Gaga, since he had no one to turn to,,, took him in and secured him a position on Nigerian Custom and Immigration. Sam learnt the ropes rather too quickly . He became a ' nouveau riche,'. ....page 48:

He raised a mansion for his grandparents, a two- bedroom flat for his ensranged wife and a four- bedroom bungalow for Talatu and her husband. For the Tills community, which he felt he had disappointed, he donated money for the renovation of their places of worship and the community's primary and secondary schools.

He was twenty--seven and felt satisfied that he had achieved a lot materially....

They were also powerful politicians in Savannah State. Sam was a senator for years. While they were going on a support for Gaga's gubernatorial campaign, they were killed by their political rival. The two of them represent the politics and Politicians about how they carry on with their brazen rape of the country's resources without any care for proper leadership that those offices demand of. The populace were helpless to the chancery of these fraudsters.

Safia was able to fulfil her dream by completing her course of study, medicine, went for the National Youth Service Corp, married a loving, dedicated, responsible and caring husband, who is a Chief Medica Director and we're blessed with three children.

### Conclusion

The close reading used in the analysis of the selected works allows the establishment of oppression and psychological trauma that the female folks and environment/society experience in hegemonic patriarchal society and how they challenged the existing culture and influenced their environment positively.

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