

Ecofeminism and Orature: Climate Change and Gender Reinvention in Yoruba Oral Narratives

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Abstract

Before modernity, oral narratives were invaluable means of solving ecological challenges, to which the woman's image is integral. Existing studies on mythical stories among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria focus on folkloric and cultural realities that underscore the socio-historical experiences of the people, but little attention has been paid to the ecofeminist experiences foregrounded in the oral narratives. Therefore, this study examines selected Yoruba narratives, highlighting the effects of climate change on humans and non-humans and how the reinvention of gender roles can preserve the environment. The study adopted the Ecofeminist Theory to examine ecological and gender issues foregrounded in the oral narratives under study. The sampled oral texts *Moremi and the Egunguns* and *Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill* were transcribed, translated, and subjected to critical, qualitative analysis, highlighting indices of environmental degradation and the reinvention of gender roles that are appropriated in them. The analysis revealed the interplay of femininity and ecological sustainability and the effect of famine caused by environmental degradation on humans and non-human entities as depicted in the oral narratives of the Yoruba people. The evaluation of the oral texts also shows that migration is a "slow violence" that aids food scarcity and may be a propensity for violent attacks among immigrants and their hosts. Furthermore, the study examined how suitable environmental ethics can help preserve and conserve the environment. In all these, the goddess's personality is portrayed as an image of womanhood and mothering, which manifests in how she protects the characters in the narrative. Thus, climate change, environmental changes, and cosmic disruptions can be avoided when specific conservative measures hinged on the reinvention of thoughts and practices are integrated into mainstream contemporary ecological and gender policies and services.

Keywords: *Climate change, ecofeminism, ethics, indigenous knowledge*

Introduction

Since the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, literature has played a significant role in conveying experiences that border on environmental changes. The

writings of English nature poets like William Wordsworth, John Keats and others underscore the import of the natural ecology in human existence. The plights and roles of women in the face of the industrial revolution

are depicted in Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, and other Victorian novelists' works. With the spurt of industrialisation and modernisation, ecological problems alongside gender division and gender inequality have become global problems and critical issues constraining nations' development. Since climate change has become a key topic for anthropological investigation, an array of researchers such as Okuyade Ogaga, Agboola Tayo, Merchant Carolyn, and Nkwainngam Gilead, to mention a few, have encountered and documented the harmful effects of climate change on (indigenous) communities in 'vulnerable' regions across the globe and has given visibility to its broader social, cultural, political, and economic repercussions. These ethnographic accounts made by the researchers mentioned above have interrogated oral narratives of grassroots climate change that witness the devastating worldwide effects of global warming. An underlying assumption of such ethnographic accounts of 'frontline' communities is that these oral narratives are primarily based on people's direct sensory experience or 'second-hand' transmission of collective memory and oral history and have formed a vital contribution to the impact of climate change (Sara de Wit et al. 2018).

Folktale, a part of oral narratives, is one of local wisdom in society. It is also a part of folklore (Marler 70) and is commonly honoured by society members (Osemeobo 49). Folktales are inherited through generation from mouth to mouth (Suwanpratest 837). Therefore, folktale contains history and also local wisdom. This wisdom includes features of climate change such as deforestation, flood, migration, bush burning, and other environmental issues. The folktales foreground the sustainable ways of preserving the environment and its inhabitants. Also, based on the available scientific, technical, and socio-economic literature, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has repeatedly concluded that the world's poor, living in high-risk areas such as sub-Saharan Africa and low-lying countries, are the most vulnerable to climate change (IPCC 2014).

Both conventional and non-conventional narratives such as UN Women, Food and Agricultural Organisation, Zaineb Abid et al. have shown that women are more affected by the ravaging effects of climate change than men. This, perhaps, is attributed to women's social roles as mothers, home and environmental managers, breadwinners, and their perceived vulnerability, which might be engendered by the burden of motherhood and

patriarchal repression (McGregor 234). Nigerian literary scholars and writers like Ogaga Okuyade, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Kaine Agary and others have raised awareness against all forms of ecological desecration. Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* is noteworthy, which she uses to artistically explore environmental issues and their effects on marginal groups like women and the girl-child. Collaborating this assertion, The United Nations Climate Change records state:

Women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change in situations of poverty, and the majority of the world's poor are women. Women's unequal participation in decision-making processes and labour markets compound inequalities and often prevent women from fully contributing to climate-related planning, policy-making and implementation (2018).

It is evident from the above that there is an overwhelming consensus in the International community that climate change is the single biggest threat to humanity's well-being, especially women and the "other" beings in this century. It is a multifaceted problem that requires a multi-sectional and holistic approach if meaningful gains towards ameliorating it are made. Therefore, the ecofeminist theory serves as a holistic model using the environmental and feminist

analytical tools to investigate the impact of climate change on women and their interconnectedness with nature and how to conserve and preserve the environment.

Ecofeminism as a conceptual tool in the human sciences originated and developed in the West, America. The human sciences study biological, social, and cultural aspects of human life and the behaviour and relation of human beings with other entities; this has paved the way for discourses like ecofeminism to solve problems related to women and nature. As the term ecofeminism indicates, it meets two theoretical enterprises Feminism and Ecocritical discourses. Feminism does not simply derive from the exploitation of women by men but, as the significant ecofeminists posit, it includes how women are the firsthand victims of the degradation of nature because of their close association and dependency on it (Merchant 384; Plumwood 300, 250; Shiva 288, 224). In contrast with mainstream feminism, ecofeminism is no longer busy taking revenge on men (Nagy 28). In so doing, it further disassociates itself from the paradigm opposed to men and seeks a liberating paradigm. The schedule of ecofeminism is revolutionary because it incorporates the roles of females in an area traditionally dominated by men. Recognising the importance of our ecosystems, third-world women have found a

shelter under the umbrella of ecofeminism to address environmental issues.

Gender, Climate Change, and the Yoruba Environment

From its onset, African literature has consistently played socially engaging roles. Gender and ecological discourses are significant aspects of human experiences, which literary artists frequently depict in the oral and written dimensions. For many years, the African environment has undergone further exploitation and degradation, especially with the incursion of Europeans into the continent. These ecological challenges range from the destruction of trees and farmlands, water pollution, loss of pastoral beauty, the destruction of water, and diverse health problems, which were alien to Africa (Ojomo 577). African women and children suffer more from environmental degradation because they are vulnerable and equally powerless. The “woman” is often metaphorically associated with the “earth.” As a society, through different phallocentric standards, regards the woman as an object to be explored, exploited, degraded and dumped when she becomes barren, sterile, and fagged out at old age, so has the earth been looked upon as a thing to be explored, exploited, degraded, and abandoned when it appears to be infertile and unproductive. There are also occasions when

the woman is forcefully taken, sexually abused, and then left to suffer, just like the land, which has often been taken forcefully,

and left to deteriorate (Nixon 384).

Consequently, recently, women have been involved in the struggle to rescue, preserve, and conserve the environment from being obliterated. In a way, they are also in the struggle to rescue and preserve the womenfolk. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Yoruba see gender and environmental issues as pivotal to the survival of their community.

To the Yoruba, the concept of gender is often culture and context-bound. The existence of gender constructs among the Yorubas may be discerned from their mythology which presents expectations for the male and female in the society at both the mythical and practical levels (Olajubu 184). These expectations are seen in their way of life and belief systems. A positive relation exists at all levels of Yoruba life because it is the driving force of peaceful living within the community. Therefore, for the Yoruba, there is no monopoly of the private or public sphere by either sex. Niara Sudarkasa (1973) surmises that neutral complementarity describes the relationship between males and females in various pre-colonial African societies more accurately than subordination. Complementarity does not iterate equality but cooperation and specified control areas for

females and males. Also, the prominence one sex enjoys in a particular range of human activity does not make the people in that sexual category independent of the other sexual category.

Analyses and Discussion

In the two selected oral narratives, there are indices of environmentalism which also underscore the role of gender in ecological conservation and sustainability. In this study, the tales are deconstructed as a gender reinvention that conveys the ecological and gender experiences of the Yoruba people. By gender reinvention, the researchers argue that the tales embody narratives that transcend conventional narratives. For instance, in *Moremi and the Egunguns*, the author reveals the woman is breaking the traditionally acclaimed attribute of passivity to become a hero among the Ife people. These realities are evident in the following assertions in the narrative: “something must be done. Let Moremi do as she wishes...The people praised and honoured Moremi for her courageous act that saved the city” In the text, there is an interplay of religion and environmentalism, of which the woman’s image is an integral part. In other words, the discussion of the tales unfolds the intersection between femininity and ecology. Apart from the social function of the narrative as a utilitarian oral art form, there

are also narratological merits which place it within the domain of oral narrative, an oral literary form. In terms of content, the selected tales underscore different topical issues that border on climate change and famine, migration, motherhood, and environmental ethics. Different literary techniques like narratological strategies, dramatic monologue, symbolism, and characterisation were deployed in the narrative. All these features make the selected tales a reinvented narrative that centres on the socio-cultural and environmental sensibilities of the Yoruba people.

Climate Change and Famine in Yoruba Oral Narratives

The tale, *Moremi and the Egunguns*, centres on the role Moremi an indigene of Ife, played in saving her land from being pillaged by the Ile-Igbo community. Ife, a productive land, is hounded by the Ile-Igbo warriors due to the lack of fertile land in Ile-Igbo. Moremi’s sacrifice and bravery helped rescue her people and land from being deserted. In the narrative, *Moremi and the Egunguns*, the effect of climate change is visible between the two cities (Ile-Igbo and Ife), separated by a thick forest. In Ile-Igbo, due to soil degradation caused by environmental change, their land is not suitable for planting, and when they plant,

their land produces terrible crops. The King of Ile-Igbo laments:

The land of Ile-Igbo did not grow enough food, and often some families had to eat wild roots because their crops were poor. (*Moremi and the Egunguns*).

From the King's lamentation, due to the poor crops in Ile-Igbo, the people are faced with food scarcity which is evident in what they eat. Some of the features of climate change, such as erosion, compaction, nutrient imbalance, pollution, acidification and increasing salinity, have been affecting soil across the globe, reducing its ability to support plant life and grow crops. This is the situation that the Ile-Igbo community find themselves, a community devoid of arable land and causing families to eat wild roots.

In the narrative, the Ile-Igbo community is compared to Ife, a land filled with milk and honey. The hunter from Ile-Igbo gives a vivid description of this green land:

Then they came to the edge of the forest and saw Ife standing there. They saw Ife's field on all sides. They saw the fertile gardens and the granaries filled with food. (*Moremi and the Egunguns*).

Evident from the excerpt above is the fruitfulness of the Ife land. The people can not go hungry with the fertility and greenery of

their land. The Ife community, due to their arable land, will be employers of labour and grow cash crops for the survival of their immediate families and society.

Its granaries are full of grains. Its market is full of people selling manioc, corn and yams. (*Moremi and the Egunguns*).

From the narrative, we can see an apparent economic boom in Ife. Agriculture has helped the economy of Ife and offered them a means of survival due to their arable land.

Furthermore, in *Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*, the narrative tells about the Tortoise and his fight for survival caused by famine in his town. His encounters with different animals also helped in understanding the concept of climate change. In the oral text, while their land was degraded, the occupant of the land were lazy farmers who were indifferent to the sustainability of the land. They did not nurture nor pay attention to their environment; they only plundered their land until there was nothing else to get from mother earth. The depravity of nature by humans is one injustice that ecofeminists fight against. Ecofeminists believe that man must tend nature as much as nature tends to man.

It was not long before a great famine occurred in the town. The famine was terrible to the extent that the King and the whole town took dung

as food. One should not be surprised about the situation the people of this town found themselves in because anyone who doesn't enjoy working will enjoy famine. (*Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*)

Famine in this town is caused by man's decision not to see themselves as part of nature. The community is devoid of environmental ethics that can help sustain the environment, which inevitably leads to famine and a lack of sustenance for the people in the community. The extent of famine in this community is alarming as the people feed on dung to survive, showing how debased humanity can become when faced with hunger. Arable land combined with sustainable environmental ethics can help to control food scarcity.

Climate Change and Environmental Ethics in Yoruba Narratives

In the texts, humans are shown to have a moral and ethical responsibility to their fellow humans and other life on the planet. The Yorubas are environmentally conscious people who believe in the symbiotic relationship between nature and man. Obiechina succinctly put this relationship into perspective:

Nature is not other as in the industrialised and urbanised West but is apprehended by traditional West African as an integral part of his world order (42)

The environment is integral to the Yoruba people because they see themselves in nature and vice versa. They believe specific attributes should be developed to nurture this symbiotic relationship. Firstly, in the *Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*, it is evident that managing nature is hard work that is not for the feeble. The Yorubas believe that to eat; man must work and till the land. The belief of the Yorubas is in hard work; notwithstanding the circumstances one finds themselves in, whether deforestation or soil erosion, man must learn to manoeuvre and tend the land. In the mentioned text, despite the biting hunger in the land, we see certain animals feeding fine and looking fresh, while the Tortoise, a lazy animal, looks depraved.

Even though the famine-affected many people, Allied Hornbill was highly glowing and always smiling. (*Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*)

The physical appearance of a well-fed man is evident on the Allied Hornbill. The Allied Hornbill eats well, and his family is well taken care of because he decides to be hardworking and tends the land. It can be assumed that this character sees himself as connected with nature, so he needs to care for and tend the land. Also, neglect of mother nature is visible in the legendary tale *Moremi and the Egunguns*, when the Ile-Igbo warriors

neglected their lands since their job as terrorists looting other lands was viable.

The looting of Ife became a way of life for the Ile-Igbo, whose people neglected their gardens even more than before (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

Now there was plenty of food for everyone in Ile-Igbo, and there was no need to worry about the crops in the fields (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

Ecofeminists object to the neglect of the environment, leading to a hierarchical attitude between human and non-human beings. In neglecting mother nature, the Ile-Igbo warriors have introduced a volatile method of acquiring food without recourse to the survival of their fellow humans, thereby breaking the circle of connectivity.

For the Yorubas, environmental ethics have a religious undertone that guides and paves the way for a better environment. Religiosity is evident in their taboos, sacrifices and practices. In *Moremi and the Egunguns*, Moremi, in a bid to save Ife's land, has to solicit the help of Esinmirin, a river goddess. While seeking the goddess's help, she pledges her son as her sacrifice to the goddess. Therefore, Moremi and Esinmirin worked together to save their land from being pillaged by the Ile-Igbo community. The two's involvement emphasises the connection between humans

and non-humans. Moremi's sacrifice is the revitalising force needed to preserve the Ife land.

She had pledged that if she saved Ife from the Egunguns, she would sacrifice her son Olu-Orogbo to the scared brook Esinmirin. She carried out her promise. She went to the brook with her son, all of Ife walking behind her. There was a ritual, and there at the edge of the running water, Olu-Orogbo was sacrificed (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

Ensuring or paying obeisance in the appropriate proportion to the goddess via a commitment to beliefs compatible with practice like worship, offering the appropriate appeasing ritual materials, and observing attributed taboos to avert these looming undesirable outcomes should be considered and not be treated lightly. As evident in the two texts, environmental ethics among the Yoruba is preserving and sustaining the environment and making it habitable for humans and non-humans, as propagated by ecofeminists.

Climate Change and Migration in Yoruba Narratives

In the two narratives, environmental changes and disasters lead to the movement of one group either permanently, seasonally or spatially from one territory to another. This is evident in the characters' movement from one

territory to another in search of food. Africa is considered one of the region's most vulnerable to climate change and climate variability due to its geographical characteristics of vast semi-arid areas, high reliance on rain-fed agriculture and low adaptive capacity. Most of the African population rely on agriculture as a primary source of livelihood, as seen in Ile-Igbo and Ife communities, as in Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill's environment. With low irrigation levels, livelihoods in this region are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Migration due to environmental changes is evident in the narratives. In *Moremi and the Egunguns*, we see the Ile-Igbo warriors pretending as masquerades to despoil the Ife community to get food for their families and community. Though migration is not permanent but seasonal or spatial, the Ile-Igbo community constantly loot the Ife people to become part of their lives.

The looting of Ife became a way of life for the Ile-Igbo, whose people neglected their gardens even more than before (*Moremi and the Egunguns*).

Furthermore, in *Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*, both characters go to another "far away" land to look for food to survive. This scenario brings to mind the nomadic living of the herders in Nigeria that move from one

territory to another in search of greenery for their cows. Food insecurity is one contributor to climate change, often leading to violent attacks from the immigrant or the host country. In the narratives, we see Ile-Igbo attacking the Ife community; the Tortoise and his friend had to find food on another person's farmland to survive. While it was not mentioned if the farm owner attacked the Tortoise and his friend, we can assume the shock and action of the farmer meeting his land foraged by outsiders. There is, therefore, a strong link between migration, climate change and violence.

Migration due to environmental changes leads the characters in the narratives to move and dominate other communities. They have set the "isms" to play by dominating, and plundering will continue as the weak will always fear the strong, as evident in *Moremi and the Egunguns*. Migration also leads to overpopulation which will also lead to food scarcity in the region migrated to as what is planted will not be able to sustain the addition to the community. This situation is surmised in *Moremi and the Egunguns*:

Life in Ife became hard. Though the people there worked industriously, they no longer had enough to eat. They planted, gathered their crops, and then the mysterious Egunguns came out of the forest and took everything away (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

Migration, therefore, aids in the imbalance challenged by ecofeminists. The imbalance gives room for a dual or hierarchical positioning in any society. Ecofeminists, therefore, call for environmental ethics or green movement to preserve and conserve a changing environment.

Climate Change, Woman and Motherhood in Yoruba Narratives

In the narratives exemplified in *Moremi and the Egunguns*, the woman breaks out of society's traditional characteristics. Moremi reinvents herself by shedding off her traditional passivity role to become Ife's saviour in the mentioned text. In the tale, men like the Ooni, elders and counsellors advised her to flee the city like the rest of the villagers and reminded her of the expected role she is meant to play as a woman:

The Oni, or Oba, of Ife, objected, **saying it was taboo for women to watch the Egunguns** and that to remain in the city was too dangerous (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

From the excerpt, it is evident that Moremi defies all odds to save Ife. If she had chosen to remain in the shackles of stipulated societal roles, maybe Ife would have been extinct, but this woman refused to let external factors hinder her and mother nature. By reinventing

herself, she becomes a revered woman, favoured by all men and women of all statuses. By breaking free from the shackles of societal norms, she aligns herself with ecofeminism tenets that while either of the sexes can fight for nature, the woman's connectivity to nature can not be subdued.

There was a festival in Ife. The people praised and honoured Moremi for her courageous act that had saved the city (*Moremi and the Egunguns*)

Also, her role as a mother is evident in her pursuit of justice for the Ife community. The love is evident in her sacrificing her only son for a better tomorrow for Ife and the unborn generations. Ecofeminists encourage this ethics of love; they believe love is the connecting web in saving the planet.

While the woman's reinvention is evident in *Moremi and the Egunguns*, in *Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*, we see the Tortoise representing the male gender, causing havoc to humans and non-human entities, all in a bid to feed.

Crocodile opened the door; she entered expecting to see her seven babies, who must have become beautiful due to the tattoos the Tortoise did on them. She saw several bones of her babies, which Tortoise had used to eat pounded yam for seven days (*Tortoise and the Allied Hornbill*)

The excerpt shows that the Tortoise is a selfish and greedy man who only plunders man all in a bid to achieve his goals. His selfish acts in the narrative caused great havoc to the Crocodile and other animals who were oblivious to his vices. This patriarchal and dominating attitude that ecofeminists challenge as they envisage that such acts can only bring destruction to the planet earth.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that, in the oral texts, the interface between environmentalism and gender relationship is explored. The paper

demonstrates the impact of climate change or environmental changes on humans and non-humans, such as famine, migration, and violence, and how this can be solved by appropriating certain features of environmental ethics in the Yoruba oral narratives. Furthermore, women are more vulnerable to climate change than men - primarily as they constitute most of the world's poor and depend more on their livelihood on natural resources threatened by climate change. Still, women can become saviours of the planet by reinventing themselves, as evidenced in the tales.

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