

Re-Imagining the Environment: Gendered Perspectives and the Aesthetics of Ecofeminism in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

This paper explores the nuanced realities associated with man and his environment in Chimamanda Adichie's novel, Purple Hibiscus. The paper beams its searchlight on the complex and sometimes often complicated relationship between women and the environment. The idea of isolating a woman's relationship with her environment for examination is foregrounded on ecofeminism as theoretical framework. Through content analysis method, this study holds the view that ecofeminism, within the body of feminism, does not just strive for women equality of rights with the men, but equally seeks to ensure and maintain a beautiful, healthy and conducive environment for all, as exemplified through the life of Auntie Ifeoma, one of the major characters in Purple Hibiscus.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Environment; Ecology; Literature; Purple Hibiscus.

Introduction

The relationship between man and the environment has fascinated writers for long. That relationship has never been on the platform of equality as man has sought to dominate and subdue the environment for reasons ranging from survival, to advancement, and greed. In this sense, in a way, there has been no love lost between man and nature since man has assumed the position of a senior partner in their relationship. As a result, the relationship between man and the environment has led to the emergence of a genre of writing called eco-writing or eco-literature which in turn, has engendered ecocriticism as a theory of engaging this form of writing. Ecocriticism is one of the most recent interdisciplinary fields to have emerged in literary and cultural studies. As an interdisciplinary field, it has the capacity to combine literary studies, sciences, cultural studies and gender studies. As a theory, ecocriticism is interested in identifying the consciousness of ecology in literature as it interrogates the complex and complicated relationship between humans and nonhumans. The interest is to make readers become more conscious to the nature-preserving attitudes in writings which are not even self-evident without the consciousness being aroused or the awareness been encouraged. Its approach and ultimate aim is to compel an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

It is imperative to state that the field of ecocriticism started in a gender-neutral manner solely as an attempt to link literature and nature. However, not quite long after its emergence and attainment of relevance, some scholars especially those of the feminist school began to question the inability of ecocriticism to cater for the unique relationship which women, whether in urban or rural societies, have with nature. These questions and standpoints were to coagulate eventually into the birth of another strand of feminism known as ecofeminism. Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne (Chircop). It is a social philosophy and political movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking, and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women, is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the environment. Ecofeminism is a hybrid term derived from two different words – ecology and feminism. While ecology is the relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment, feminism is a term which implies women's struggles for equality of rights between male and female in the society. Therefore, ecofeminism has to do with the study of ecology and how women relate to it. It also implies the struggle of women all over the world to gain equal rights with men over the environment; the

land in particular. This essay is an effort to identify ecofeminism as not just that which seeks for equal ownership of land, but also that which seeks to carry out an investigation into women's contribution to the growth of a beautiful environment as portrayed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006).

Ecofeminism, according to Glotfelty *et al.* (1996) is "a hybrid label to describe a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature". This definition brings to mind the way women have been portrayed in general in comparison to nature, and as being inferiors to men. Throughout history, nature has been portrayed as feminine and women are often thought to be closer to nature than men. Thus, the status of women in the society has always been governed by the norms of a patriarchal system of social organisation. In most communities in the world, the land often belongs to the man so that even when a woman buys a land, that land still belongs to the man; who can be her husband, father, brother or even her son. Land, more often than not, is transmitted through patrilineal lineage; though in Nigeria, for instance, women who by chance inherit or buy a land can retain it as their personal property.

In terms of how life is lived on a daily basis, the bases of sex-role differentiation and the types of relationship which exist between sexes, are linked with the pattern of cultivation and exploitation of forest wealth in most rural communities. A central view in ecofeminism avers that male ownership of land has led to a dominator culture (patriarchy), manifesting itself in food export, overgrazing, and the tragedy of exploitation of people and an abusive land ethics in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. Furthermore, the environment in which women and men live their daily lives and, which remains the source of their daily needs does not always remain the same. The environment has been undergoing changes and will continue to change. Today, there is a growing fear that women (especially pregnant women) and children suffer more than men from various kinds of environmental problems. A data from the United Nations Development Programme published in 2007 reveals that domestic activities (cooking, cleaning, provisioning, food growing, waste disposal, caring for the sick, the frail, the young and other dependents) continue to be mostly done by women, and that these activities have effect on the overall well-being of women, "despite the steadily increasing presence of women in the paid workforce" (qtd. in Buckingham and Kulcur, 2015:667).

Clark in *The Wives Revolt* (1991) attests to the back-breaking domestic responsibilities which women shoulder in the society:

OKORO: ... In pursuit of their ideas, which we declare are not only preposterous but in complete violation of our ancient custom and law, they have refused for many days to perform their civic duties and responsibilities, as a consequence of which our streets, our public spaces, right to the market square, that is their own preserve, are today filled with the rank excrement of earthworms and goats... (1-2)

These domestic duties, being referred to, include: cooking, cleaning and other household chores and caring. However, as women are engaged in these duties, they are in most cases in the direct line of contact with contamination, pollution, water and air borne diseases which impact on their health and wellbeing. It is therefore expected that women now have a special interest in ensuring a healthy environment; after all, it is the place where they interact daily. And this brings to mind the claims of some ecofeminists that the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women (Southeimer, 1991; Sewlall, 2007; Shobita, 1991). It is against this background that this essay investigates ecofeminism as delineated in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is interesting to note that the women especially Aunty Ifeoma in Adichie's novel ensure a conducive and healthy environment, and also try to help the young ones to get acclimatized, thereby raising their consciousness concerning the flora and fauna in their indigenous environment.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that gives a better understanding of this paper is ecofeminism, and it may be recognised as having a relationship with ecocriticism. Glotfeltry (qtd. in Barry, 1995:249) simply defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. Adding force to how ecocriticism finds support in the nexus between literature and nature, Larsen (2007:342) opines that: “Ecocriticism deals with the way literature contributes to the articulation, interpretation and transformation of the boundary between nature and culture or even broader between the non-human and the human”. The two definitions are poignant as they acknowledge the very important link between literature and the environment, thereby validating the choice of ecocriticism as a theoretical base for this essay. The definitions hold that literature can be related to the physical environment, and that through literature, an understanding of the nature and culture of the people in a particular geographical area can be deciphered.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology (MacGregor, 2006:286). This movement seeks to eradicate all forms of social injustice, not just injustice against women and the environment (Warren, 2000). The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in which she argues that there are particular and significant connections between women and nature (Merchant, 1985). Ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all subordinate groups (women, people of colour, children, the poor, etc.) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.). All of these subordinate groups have been subjected to oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization from all patriarchal societies that emphasis and value men (Warren, 2000). Ecofeminists believe that these connections are illustrated through traditionally "feminine" values such as reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature.

Several feminists make the distinction that it is not because women are female or "feminine" that they relate well with nature, but because of their similar states of oppression by the same maledominant forces. The marginalization is evident in the gendered language used to describe nature and the animalized language used to describe women. Some discourses link women specifically to the environment because of their traditional social role as a nurturer and caregiver (Stoddart *et al.*, 2017). As there are several strands of feminism and different beliefs held by feminists, there are different versions of ecofeminism. Spretnak (1982), has argued that there are three main 'paths' to ecofeminism, and that they draw in a diverse group of people, which strengthens any movement, such as: through the study of political theory as well as history; through the belief and study of nature-based religions; and through environmentalism.

In the essay entitled: "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health", Gaard and Gruen (1993) outline what they call the "ecofeminist framework". The essay provides a wealth of data and statistics in addition to laying out the theoretical aspects of the ecofeminist critique. The framework describes its intention to establish ways of viewing and understanding our current global situations, so that we are better able to understand how we arrived at this point and, what may be done to ameliorate the ills. The four sides of the frame are: the mechanistic materialist model of the universe that resulted from the scientific revolution and the subsequent reduction of all things into mere resources to be optimized, dead inert matter to be used; the rise of patriarchal religions and their establishment of gender hierarchies along with their denial of immanent divinity; self and other dualisms and the inherent power and domination ethic it entails; and capitalism and its intrinsic need for the exploitation, destruction and instrumentalization of animals, earth and people for the sole purpose of creating wealth. They hold that these four factors have brought us to what ecofeminists see as a "separation between nature and culture" that is the root source of our planetary ills.

Shiva (1989) avers that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions and that this connection has been ignored. She further says that women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes" (23). She makes the point that:

... these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth. (23)

Shiva (1991) blames this failure on the West's patriarchy, and the patriarchal idea of what development is. According to Shiva (1991), patriarchy has labelled women, nature, and other groups not growing the economy as "unproductive" (199-200). Thus, there are two broad camps of ecofeminists: social ecofeminists and cultural ecofeminists.

Social ecofeminists are those who stress the cultural construction of gender. They argued that the symbolic coding of nature as female which pervades Western culture reinforced the domination of both women and nature. ... [C]ultural ecofeminists are those who are less wary of essentialism, have proposed that there is an inherent, not merely historically contingent, caring relationship between women and nature. (Goodbody, 2011:12)

Considering the key premises upon which cultural ecofeminism are based, MacCormack (1980) opines that one may not be sure that women have a more caring relationship to nature than men do. According to MacCormack (1980:12):

The link between nature and women is not a 'given'. Gender and its attributes are not pure biology. The meanings attributed to male and female are as arbitrary as are the meanings attributed to nature and culture. ... (i)f men and women are one species and together constitute human society then, logically, analysis of intrinsic gender attributes must be made with reference to the same domain.

MacCormack (1980) presents a well-argued critique of fundamental cultural ecofeminist principles. Cultural ecofeminists perhaps forget that all of nature is connected, not only nature to nature, humans to humans, or even women to nature, but also men to nature. Owing to these reasons, most critics give precedence to social ecofeminism, and most often treat it as interpretation of 'ecofeminism'. Ecofeminists view nature as not only a hierarchy but also an interconnected web, and in so doing, celebrate diversity (King, 1990). This view of nature is not shared by eco-feminists alone, but also by ecocritics. What sets ecofeminism apart from the rest of ecocriticism regarding their views on nature is that ecofeminists believe that the subordination of women and nature are inextricably linked, in that the oppression of one reinforces the oppression of the other (Murphy, 1995; Gates, 1998; Armbruster and Wallace, 2011). This leads to a kind of vicious downward spiraling of mutual subordination ignited by, firstly, harmful cultural constructs, and, secondly, multinational corporations, global capitalism, and constructed western dualisms instigated by patriarchy (Plumwood, 1986; Berman, 2001). Murphy (1995), in his book, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* takes a position with which many ecofeminists would agree with by stating the following:

To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere, in which human beings participate or perish. (49)

The problems against which eco-feminists voice their opinions upon are the same problems which are born out of a patriarchal society; they are the same problems that present threat to nature. Ecofeminists claim that under patriarchy, women are suppressed to the extent that they must take on their husband's name; and they are viewed as sex-objects and are treated as literal objects in the legal system (Berman, 2001). Further, the result of a patriarchal society in which members of that society live by the false construct that women and nature are equated, is that nature is objectified, and thus, is treated as material goods which can be sold for profit (Haraway, 1991; Berman, 2001).

Methodology

Purple Hibiscus as the preferred text for analysis in this paper hinges on the fact that not many studies have engaged the text from the prism of ecofeminism especially with regards to the important, but hardly recognised roles women play as well-entrenched ecological citizens. Content analysis method is employed in examining Adichie's inconspicuous portrayal of women in the novel, through Auntie Ifeoma, as protectors of the environment. The nuanced personality of Auntie Ifeoma is subjected to descriptive and detailed analyses in order to reveal her gendered personality and ecofeministic attributes.

Women and the Environment

World's environmental realities today reveal that women – especially rural women – have inherited a situation whereby their rights and access to cultivable land have decreased and the open forest, woodlands and bush from which they gather such vital necessities as fodder, fuel wood and water have grown scarce or have disappeared. The beauty of an environment and its conduciveness to health and better living is enhanced majorly by the activities and contributions of women all over the world to the environment. Consequently, anything that affects the environment will have more adverse effect on the woman first and then the children. This is because the woman is much closer to the environment than the man. While the man in recent times is away doing a 'white collar' job, most women are cultivating the soil, tending to household chores for a beautiful home setting, and tending to the environment to ensure a healthy and conducive environment. However, most of these activities are being disrupted because the society is governed by the norms of a patriarchal system of social organization. Typically, in the industrialized world in which we live, industrial pollution and even "developments" are threats primarily to the ecological system. The basic concern of women all over the world is to endeavour to influence and contribute to government policies on environmental control, in order to ensure a better and much more conducive environment.

In the preface to *Women and the Environment in Nigeria: Instructional manual* (1996), Bata Musa, the Director General of Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development of Nigeria writes:

The environment in which women and men live their daily lives, and which remains the source of our daily life was not left out of the Twelve Critical Areas earmarked for action for the advancement of women following the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in September 1995, which has as its theme Equality, Development and Peace. In particular, an increased and more meaningful

role was advocated for women in the management of a continuously threatened world environment. (v)

This implies that representatives of women and governments from all over the world agreed that women should be more effectively involved in managing and protecting the environment. The twelve critical areas discussed include: power sharing and decision making; education; environment and development; poverty; human rights; economic participation; violence; mass media; armed and other conflicts; the girl-child; national and international machineries; and health.

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the environment is presented using two prominent towns in Nigeria, namely: Nsukka and Enugu. There is also a brief focus on the condition of the weather, precisely the harmattan and rainy seasons and how both affect the environment. The novel is set in an Igbo environment thus the reader is introduced to (the) flora, fauna and topography of the Igbo land, south-east of Nigeria. In Nsukka, the University of Nigeria is the main setting; the University environment possesses various types of trees planted all over it. In fact, the novel portrays how trees and flowers are used for the fencing of most of the houses in Nsukka in a way that shows the rich ecology of the land. During the harsh and dry harmattan season, Kambili the character from whose lens most of the happenings in the novel are unveiled, reveals the adverse effect of harmattan on trees and flowers as leaves turn pale and begin to shed so that the trees and flowers are left bare. Auntie Ifeoma shows her concern by "muttering that the harmattan was killing her plants" (128). As Jaja and Kambili are driven into the University of Nsukka, they are welcomed by beautiful scenery of various types of trees at the entrance of the school. Auntie Ifeoma later takes all the children out on a tour of the campus environment, and the reader is kept abreast of the types of trees and flowers around the campus namely: guava trees, mango trees, a roundabout with pink periwinkle flowers, gmelina and neem (dogonyaro) trees. However, it is surprising to note that in most parts of Nigeria, these trees are destroyed daily and the beauty and comfort derived from them are lost.

Auntie Ifeoma: The Quintessential Ecofeminist

Auntie Ifeoma, one of the major characters in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a tall woman with a well-proportioned body. She walks fast like one who knows just where she is going and what she is going to do there. She equally speaks the way she walks. Her life is full of laughter and happiness despite the fact that she is a widow with three children. Auntie Ifeoma is a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where she also resides. Auntie Ifeoma can first be described as a feminist and then as an ecofeminist. As a feminist, she identifies how marriage often seems to aid in the oppression of women and in the establishment of male supremacy. Therefore, she argues that women who have escaped the clutches of marriage, as divorcee or widow, may actually be the lucky ones because "sometimes life begins when marriage ends" (75). When queried if that is what she tells her students as a lecturer: "Seriously, yes" (75), she answers with unabashed seriousness. Auntie Ifeoma argues further that those young ladies who marry early as undergraduates to wealthy men end up together with their degrees as properties of men.

From Auntie Ifeoma progressive pro-woman position on issues, one can infer that she is a woman who believes that women can be who and what they want to be, without depending solely on men as she herself has so elegantly and courageously proved as a widow, solely caring and providing for three children in a patriarchal society. The question then becomes, to which group of feminists can she be classified? Is she a liberal feminist, radical feminist, womanist or gay feminist? For the sake of this essay however, she is not classified as any of the above; rather, she is classified as an ecofeminist.

Auntie Ifeoma is classified an ecofeminist because like all ecofeminists, she is conscious of her environment and tries as much as possible to maintain a healthy and beautiful relationship with that environment. Her environmental consciousness is revealed first in the way she manages her home

especially the house in which she lives. Despite the size of the house, she is able to ensure that it is always clean. For instance, her kitchen is described as follows: "... there was hardly enough room in the kitchen not to get in her way...". The light blue kitchen tiles were worn and chipped at the corners, but they looked *scrubbed clean as did the pot*" (115, emphasis not in original). One wonders why the kitchen of all places in the house has to be referred to in a discussion on environmental issues. Of course, the reason is not farfetched as the state of a woman's kitchen reveals the level of cleanliness she possesses. Apart from the kitchen, another vital part of the house which explains her environmental consciousness and in addition, her ecofeminist temper is the front of the house. In fact, the front of the house reveals the ecological perspective of her ecofeminist nature:

Kevin drove slowly, muttering Auntie Ifeoma's house number ... It was in the fourth block ... a tall bland building with peeling blue paint and with television aerials sticking out from the verandahs ... In front was a circular burst of bright colours – a garden-fenced around with barbed wire. Roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora and croton grew side by side like a handpainted wreath. (112).

Despite the bland outward look of the building, Auntie Ifeoma still does her best to make the environment beautiful and conducive for living. The attention she gives to the flowers is equally revealed: "Auntie Ifeoma stopped to pluck at some browned flowers in the garden as we walked to the car, muttering that the harmattan was killing her plants" (128). And when Jaja who is seeing such species of flower for the first time reacts at the sight of the purple hibiscus from which the novel derives its name, she delightfully explains to him how she comes about them: "My good friend Phillipa is a lecturer in botany. She did a lot of experimental work while she was here" (128). Clearly, the purple hibiscus is a product of Phillipa's diligent botanical experimentations.

In order to maintain and protect her garden of beautiful and exotic flowers, Auntie Ifeoma builds a fence around it: "I had to fence my garden because the neighbourhood children came in and plucked many of the more unusual flowers" (128). Her sense of and love for the environment is further heightened in the way she cares for the flowers by weeding the garden and, also, spending considerable time and resources (water) to keep her flower garden flourishing. Despite water scarcity in the town where she lives, "Auntie Ifeoma continued watering the row of tiny bananacoloured flowers that clustered in bunches ... She had already used up the biggest container of water ..." (143).

Another conscious environmental distinction which Auntie Ifeoma portrays is revealed when she takes out Jaja and Kambili along with her children for sightseeing. She takes the children on a tour around the University campus environment. She introduces various types and the uses of flowers and trees to the children – the use of trees and flowers for fence and roundabout as well as the medicinal usefulness of others. Auntie Ifeoma "... switched the ignition off again, and the car hurtled down the street. Gmelina and dogonyaro trees stood firmly on either side. The sharp, astringent smell of the dogonyaro leaves filled the car, and Amaka breathed deeply and said they cured malaria" (13). In a form of good bye tour of Nsukka, the university town, Auntie Ifeoma takes the children to Odim Hill for a picnic. A brief description of the hill is given with such insects as grasshoppers and spiders getting a mention: "The climb was easy because there were many zigzagging paths. There was a fresh smell in the air and, once in a while, a crackling in the long grass that bordered the paths ... grasshoppers made that sound with their wings ..." (277-8). This not only solidifies Auntie Ifeoma's love of nature and the environment, it equally paints her in glowing terms as someone who desires to educate others especially children about nature, by familiarizing them with the environment especially the flora and fauna of Igbo land in which the novel is set.

Adichie should be commended for unconsciously promoting ecofeminist philosophy and ideas through the character of Auntie Ifeoma in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. Through Auntie Ifeoma, we are introduced to the Igbo metropolis especially to its flora and the fauna such that anyone who reads the novel gets some valuable knowledge about the ecology of Igbo land. Indeed, Auntie Ifeoma is a quintessential ecofeminist as she single-handedly manages her home effectively, ensuring its neatness and beauty as well as relating well with her environment as encapsulated by proponents of ecofeminism. The well-being of the society and its survival seems to be her priority as indicated through her effort to see that the purple hibiscus is made to grow in Enugu, in the home of his oppressive brother, Eugene to which she sends some of the stalks through Jaja, Eugene's son.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The main thrust of ecofeminism, which this paper presents, is not entirely the need for women to seek equality of rights over land with men, but it is more importantly, the desire to live in an environment that is beautiful, healthy and conducive for all inhabitants: humans, animals and plants. Although this paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, it can be safely concluded that there are other novels across regional boundaries out there, in which the theories and ideologies espoused here, can be appropriated for a discursive engagement of issues bordering on nature especially the relationship of humans with the environment. It is therefore recommended that more research focusing on an ecofeminist approach to literary works should be written by other scholars not only to broaden the scope of knowledge of and on ecofeminism, but to also propagate the ideas it represents in order to enhance literary scholarship.

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