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Study on the Interrelationship between Nature and the Female Gender: An Analysis of Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

Onyemachi, Nkiru Doris

Ph.D. Research Student, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract:

*One of the core values of literature is its ability to adopt existents in the society and restructure it in an aesthetic form so as to pass specific message(s) to the audience. Adopting the novel to carry out this task, Okoye inspected the environment and its effect on the inhabitants with the pivotal theme of gender inequality in *The Fourth World*. This paper focused on female characters in Okoye's novel, oscillating between ecofeminism and environmental psychology. It presented the relationship between nature and the female gender (sources of reproduction), portraying how injustice meted out on nature can affect the female gender negatively and vice versa; it depicted environmental degeneration and its effect on the growth and development of the female characters in the novel. Also the paper reviewed the different types of female characters in the novel and their mode of assimilating the environment and situation they find themselves in. It concluded its analysis focusing on the way forward, carving out for self an identity as embodied in the novel through the heroine, Chira.*

Keywords: Conflict, Ecofeminism, Environment, Gender, Nature.

1. Introduction

The African literature is adorned with great perspectives and themes drawn from cultures and existents inherent in the African society and other societies at large. These perspectives and themes make the human being their central point, providing vivid messages, intriguing information and adequate knowledge in empowering the human race. Most times these perspectives and themes go in contrary to the functional norm existing in a society and thereby bringing about change in that society. It is on this bedrock that feminist criticism emerged as a perspective in African literature. In establishing the aim of feminism, Abrams (2005) acknowledges the essence of feminist critics:

- The often-asserted goal of feminist critics has been to enlarge and reorder, or in radical instances entirely to displace, the literary canon – that is, the set of works which, by a cumulative consensus, have come to be considered “major” and to serve as the chief subjects of literary history, criticism, scholarship, and teaching (p. 96)

Feminism is a conflict perspective that presents the needs, values, beliefs, goals and interests of females which go contrary to the functional practices existing in that society. In African literature “critiquing the image of women in African fiction has been an integral aspect of studies in the field and will continue to generate interest for the obvious reason that there would always be divergent opinions seeking expression on the subject matter” (Ogwude, 2013, p. 3). This shows that feminism has come to stay and will keep broadening its horizon as long as the African society and other societies at large fail to desist from being a patriarchal one. It is on this premise that this work aims at discussing the interrelationship between nature and the female gender in the society, oscillating between ecofeminism and environmental psychology as observed in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*.

Ecofeminism explores male dominance in the society (especially in power) and its adverse effects as experienced by the female gender in that society. According to Buntingham, ecofeminism is based on:

- The social constructivist analyses ... drew from the Marxist and social feminist literature to show how women's position in society (as, for example, careers of children and other vulnerable family members, domestic workers, and low paid/status workers) derived from prevailing social and economic structures, which exposed them to a particular set of environmental incivilities. (p. 3)

Ecofeminism shows the relationship between the female and her environment; how the environment directly or indirectly affects the psychology of the female. As an outlook, Bechtel, Churchman and Gifford note that environmental psychology is “a field of study that examines the interrelationship between environments and human affect, cognition and behavior” (De Young, 2013). It focuses on how the human minds and behaviours are shaped by their environments; how their actions are influenced by the environments they find themselves in. Relating both ecofeminism and environmental psychology in the analysis of the novel, *The Fourth World* represents the maternal bond shared between the female gender and nature which are two great sources of reproduction.

According to Griggs (1992), the term “The Fourth World” designates “the poorest, and most underdeveloped states of the world ... any oppressed or underprivileged victim of a state.” Okoye’s view corroborates with this definition as she presents *The Fourth World* as a novel that depicts the poorest in the country where the basic amenities and structures tend to be luxury amongst the inhabitants of the area. The novel portrays an environmental damaged society, neglected or probably abandoned by the government, where the survival of the people depends not only through their struggles but by grace. The novel is set in the Eastern part of Nigeria, Enugu, with a fictional location named Kasanga Avenue “otherwise known as the Fourth World or Urban Jungle by snobs.” (Okoye, 2013, p. 103). It focuses on the day-to-day struggles and challenges faced by “the wretched of the earth” especially by a young girl called Chira who is the heroine of the novel. At the age of 18, Chira is not only saddled with the responsibility of caring for herself but also for her mother (Kodili) who refuses to undertake any responsibility of providing for the family after the death of her husband. According to the narrator:

- Kasanga Avenue was a destroyer of people’s bodies and minds. Living there meant not being able to see a doctor because there is no money. It meant not having a good job or not having a job at all because of a lack of education or skill. It meant losing children to illnesses because of dearth of clean water, a filthy environment and insufficient proper food. Kasanga Avenue was a maximum security prison for people who had committed the crime of allowing them to be born into poverty. (p. 95)

This summarizes the novel’s themes of poverty, environmental damage, corruption and government malfunction etc. The questions pose in this paper are “Who or what is the cause of the environmental damages as witnessed in the world of the novel?”, “Who suffers the most in this societal decay?”, “How does neglect in the environment affect the female gender or what is the interrelationship between nature and the female gender?”

2. Main Work

2.1. *The Relationship between Nature and the Female Gender*

The relationship between nature and the female gender is distinct in the novel. The narrator presents both nature and the female gender as being burdened by the environmental damages which are often goaded by males in high places. This is first witnessed by Chira during a visit to her father, Akaraka, at the hospital:

- She heard the sound of hard shoe soles hitting the concrete steps. A man was striding up the steps towards them. He was dressed in a traditional outfit of rich textured brocade. His movements seemed ostentatious and exaggerated to her, the type of swagger some people acquired as they climbed the social ladder according to one of her teachers at FGSS. (p. 2)

The word ‘hard’ which is used in describing the shoe soles and the word ‘hitting’ represent a forceful movement on the concrete steps (linked to the ground which is part of nature) showcasing ego; the dressing depicts richness and a high social status. It is this status that gives the man the power to visit his brother when the visiting hour is over even when Chira is denied the same right to visit her dying father. Both Chira and the concrete steps are threatened and dominated by this male power. The class status existing between Chira and the man portrays a clear division between the rich and the poor; it gives the audience a hint of inequality between these two classes mostly observed in the public sectors thereby redefining the word ‘public’ to represent ‘selected few’.

Still at the hospital, the interrelationship between the female gender and nature is strengthened with a tree acting as a shield to the helpless women whose loved ones are on admission. In the absence of adequate rooms for relatives (mostly women) of the sick ones, the “huge mango tree” (19) offers shelter to them “some of the women were sitting on mats spread on the grass, some on bare grass and a handful on the gnarled and exposed roots of the giant tree” (p. 19), hence, sharing their burden with nature. The helpless women do not only sit on its exposed roots but also care less about the grass which they sit on; this presents nature providing shelter for them and bearing the brunt of the women’s condition. Both the tree’s root, grass and the women are being exposed to the harsh condition they find themselves in. Also the helpless state of the society’s sources of reproduction is symbolized in relating the women’s plight to that of the guava tree at the hospital with “dozens of rotten and smelly fruit that lay scattered on the ground” (p. 26). On the other hand, the bond between nature and the female gender is threatened by the local government council when the government officials fell the tree at the mini market which serves as an umbrella tree to women who cannot afford a stall at the Four O’clock market. This is done without the consideration of the women or environmental implication; the reason rumoured is “a rich man bought the place and is going to build a big hotel or something there” (p. 144). This shows environmental degeneration as one of the effects of capitalism. Nature serving as solace inspires Chira to take a decision on her future while gazing at the flowering of a young orange tree with a bird atop it:

- No, she was not going to rely on people any more. She was going to rely on herself. After all, she had found herself a job when no one else had been able to do that for her ... All hope was not lost, she concluded ... All she required was a great determination and a great deal of patience. The bird flew away apparently having noticed her. Chira left the young orange tree and walked slowly to the gate. ... Her mind was far away. She was making fresh plans. (p. 312)

2.2. *Environmental Damages and Its Effect on the Female Gender*

According to David B. Resnik and Christopher J. Portier (2008):

- All organisms depend on their environments for energy and the materials needed to sustain life: clean air, potable water, nutritious food, and safe places to live. For most of human history, increases in longevity were due to improved access to

these necessities. Advances in agriculture, sanitation, water treatment, and hygiene have had a far greater impact on human health than medical technology. (p. 59)

As human beings depend on the environment for sustenance, so does the environment depend on human beings for development. In a situation where the environment is abused, damaged or neglected, it takes its toll on the people but at most cases on the down-trodden people living in that environment. This is the background which Okoye presents in *The Fourth World*. Akaraka's death is related to insufficient basic necessities in the environment for the enhancement of a healthy living. His whole life is that of struggles which he accepts as his "destiny" (p. 28) and gives himself the alias 'Akaraka'; he undertakes many odd jobs so as to make ends meet yet he is left with little or nothing to show for it. The sufferings and hard labour he faces without benefiting adequate money to provide the required food and health care for survival end up driving him into a sickness which he fails to survive thus leading to his final subjection to death.

Environmental decay is always championed by poor governance in the society. Uchendu et al (2010) defines a good leadership as "anchored on credibility, accountability, selflessness, initiative, vision, integrity, tolerance, self-discipline, transparency, and readiness to serve" (p. 2). All these characteristics are found lacking in the male-dominated governance of Kasanga Avenue. The people of Kasanga Avenue are faced with a government who prefers enriching himself than serving the people. The government hospital where Akaraka is rushed to before his death refuses to administer treatment for nearly two days because of his inability to provide the needed deposit. Government hospitals are built to charge patients little or nothing but due to lack of funding and abandonment by government, the management mishandles the hospital (since no one probes its affairs). Through Chira, the narrator expresses the poor management of government hospital:

- Chira learnt a few more things from the people under the mango tree. In addition to buying medicines and materials for their sick ones in the ward, they also laundered their bedclothes and hospital gowns, and provided dishes for them when required. They sometimes carried out the nurses' duty as well, feeding the patients, turning them in bed, or giving them a bed bath. (p. 46)

Death being the final rest and maximum peace from all life struggles is embraced by some without much struggle. Akaraka and some other men like Mama Egodi's husband, who are the major breadwinners of the family, retire to this final rest so early leaving their wives and children to their fate. As a result of Akaraka's death which is an effect of environmental damage, Chira is forcefully turned into a woman and a debtor in order to cater for her needs and that of her mother. Due to the condition she finds herself in "she chose to 'sell her shame in the market' as her people would say and ask for a loan" (p. 157). The narrator draws the attention of the audience to the poverty rate in Kasanga Avenue:

- All adults in Kasanga Avenue, without exception were in one form of debt or the other. It was a second nature. There was no way for them to survive. 'A borrower is far better than a thief' they would say to stop themselves feeling bad about their borrowing. (157-158)

Also the acceptance and adaptation of scanty basic foods and ingredients is registered by Mama Egodi who expresses that "I've learnt to do without fish or meat in my soup, and without palm oil. I'm yet to learn to do without salt" (p. 124). This shows the high rate of poverty where the basics are referred to as luxury.

Kasanga Avenue, which booms with "unemployment, meagre earnings, hunger, disease, an unhealthy environment and poor housing" (p. 59), portrays a damaged environment sidelined in the affairs of the government and development of the country. The type of building present in Kasanga Avenue is the shanties which are dilapidated. Rain seep through the leaking roof of the shanty Chira and her mother occupies, spilling on the floor even when "she had placed pots and pans and plates all around to collect the drips and stop the room from being flooded. It had been taxing, moving from one spot to another to empty each of the eleven containers in turn before they filled to the brim again" (p. 146). Also neglect in the drainage system causes heavy floods at Kasanga Avenue. At most cases, the floods drown people (mostly women and kids) to a point that "The year before, a small girl and an elderly woman, both residents of the avenue have perished in the Great Floods of Kasanga Avenue, as the press named the annual deluge" (p. 146). But the government turns a blind eye to it even when the residents "dutifully paid their taxes each year and deserve a safe environment to live in" (p. 147). The flood drowns Little Bebe, the only surviving child of Mama Bebe (out of nine pregnancies). This great loss by Mama Bebe is also in relation to nature losing its own product; this is seen in the extent of environmental damages on a tree as mirrored through Chira:

- She went back to the window and focused her gaze on the undernourished mango tree standing in front of the shanty, too close to the deep gutter for its exposed roots to obtain enough nutrients. Not a single fruit was left on the tree even though it was the season for mangoes. The tree had lost its fruit prematurely, as it usually did, to the ever hungry children and young adults of the avenue. (p. 92)

This shows that the dereliction of duty by the government and failure to provide the basic needs for the people bring about a negative impact on nature which degenerates to environmental decay.

In the midst of all these problems, the rich and those in government keep mismanaging public funds for frivolous activities like advertising birthday anniversaries in the newspapers and on air, marrying multiple wives, organizing ostentatious parties, etc. The magnitude of the cake used for the Governor's birthday celebration astonishes Chira who "gazed open-mouthed at the birthday cake. The cake stand was like a small tree with many branches. On each branch stood an enormous cake, looking like part of a Table Mountain with snow on top. There were ten branches and ten cakes" (p. 270). This is an event organized in a country where some of the inhabitants live in slum with poor health facilities, poor education, inadequate food, clothing and shelter etc. At the end of the day,

the women, who are attributed with the trait of longevity as opposed to most of the men in the novel, are saddled with the burden and sole responsibility of child rearing.

2.3. *Gender Inequality and Its Effect on Education, Work and Development*

Gender inequality is one burning issue encountered in most feminists' works. Lanser (2013) argues that "The study of gender and narrative explores the (historically contingent) ways in which sex, gender, and/or sexuality might shape both narrative texts themselves and the theories through which readers and scholars approach them" (p. 1). Gender inequality simply means a situation whereby a particular gender dominates the other by possessing greater right/authority than the other. Most times, this right or authority is portioned out based on the culture of a particular society. It is in a bid to erase the part of culture which promotes the oppression of the female gender as seen in most novels written by the male gender that African female writers emerged. Opara (2004) asserts that "Armed with the pen, the African female writer views female solidarity and integrative education as the bulwark against retrogressive cultural patterns and ignorance" (p. 17).

Gender inequality is viewed as a major theme in the novel because it aids in building up the succession of events in the novel. Most of the women at Kasanga Avenue lack the power and strategies in family planning due to how the society has shaped them. To the society, their major role in the family is childbearing and this is why they are not given an adequate education or skill that can fetch a better income. They undertake jobs that fetch very little income in the family, thus, suffering more when their husbands die. The cultural background also restricts them from making major decisions and carrying out tasks which are reserved for the male gender. Chira's unsuccessful attempt in carrying out her father's last wish throws more light on the discrimination of women in inheritance of land. She is chided by her uncle, Amos, when she raises the issue of mortgaging her father's share of land to cover the burial expenses and further her education as instructed by her father on his death bed:

- I said shut up before you make our ancestors turn in their grave! Your father must have suffered from flash of insanity to say that to you. Women don't have any say in family land matters. They are not even allowed to be present when land matters are discussed...I will hold his share of the family land in trust for your brother, Nodu, until he becomes a man. (p. 83)

Though she bears the burden of soliciting for help in the transportation of her father's corpse and making arrangements for a proper burial, her younger brother who has contributed nothing due to his absence and age is preferred for such discussion because of the gender preference by the culture of the society. Her inability to mortgage the land leaves her in more debt and her uncle who mortgages it to himself refuse to account for the money. This portrays one of the major problems generated by gender inequality and the atrocities committed by some greedy men under the guise of culture. Due to the effect of this inequality in gender, Chira has to battle dropping out of school and inefficiency in securing a job. Also she is refused employment by a male manager just because of a general misconception of her gender.

In Chira, Okoye presents a strong and determined 21st century female character who is not intimidated by the problems surrounding her but is resolute in achieving her goals which include getting a job, achieving a successful higher education and relocating her family to a better environment. She keeps hunting for a job until she meets Dr Ajali who employs her based on her intelligence and capabilities. Dr Ajali's acceptance of Chira as a determined female eager to learn and develop her potentials shows that "Beyond identity politics, the most urgent tasks in African feminism are to match the analysis of self with the other to create a better understanding of ordinary women's lives, increase the production of knowledge that would be relevant to African women's empowerment, and align different feminisms" (Afonja, 2007, p. 5).

2.4. *Marriage as a Flight from Self-Actualisation and Self-Identity:*

Okoye takes a swipe at marriage in the novel, portraying most women going into marriage due to cultural influence, poverty, poor academic performance, environmental decay etc. As represented in the novel "In other cultural milieu is the African female body more reified than in the African society where a woman is primarily viewed in terms of her reproductive role which underpins her sexuality" (Opara, 2004, p. 18). This is the primary role designated by culture for female characters presented in the novel; and this is why most of them end up in abject poverty. Marriage to some women is a self-fulfillment and an escape from sufferings in their environment; but this is not always the case because they end up experiencing worse situation and at most cases lose their own identity. Kodili marries Akaraka with the arrangement of both families and without any prior knowledge about him. To her, marriage is like "an escape from a home where laborious work and hunger were constant tormentors" (p. 17). But instead of getting that escape, she becomes more entangled with suffering and poverty. Mama Egodi, who marries at a tender age (as pressured by her mother), ends up with regret, poverty and widowhood; also she loses two out of her three children to an accident while they are hawking to make ends meet even when there is a law against child labour in the state. This expresses a decayed environment where the government does not care for the poor by providing their basic amenities but is quick to make laws against child labour. Also Ogom (Chira's best friend), who is influenced by her mother – Lolo, sees marriage as an escape from education. To Lolo, Ogom's marriage to Chikeson (a US based man) means attaining higher class status and an opportunity for her daughter to "see the world" (p. 112). This desperate attempt for a change of environment by Lolo prompts her to convince Ogom to marry Chikeson in absentia; with the poor orientation she has received from her mother about marriage and her hatred for education, Ogom fails to see her marriage to Chikeson as a deceit fuelled by Chikeson and his parents until she travels to America and discovers that he has an African-American wife. In Agatha, Ogom's US friend, we see an innocent young lady who marries a US based man she hardly knows because she wants to escape from her impoverished environment but he turns her into "a goose that laid golden eggs to him" (p. 289) by taking all her salaries which he sees as a debt she owes him for training her in the nursing school.

Unlike all the female characters mentioned above, Chira sees marriage differently. She believes that one has to marry one who shares same interest with one unlike her rich cousin, Osima, who stops his wife from attending school and going to places after marriage “stripping her of her identity and making her a prisoner in his house” (p. 202). Chira sees marrying Maks “like being in a prison so to speak. He would take away her freedom. He would kill her ambition. He would submerge her values under his” (p. 312). She turns down his proposal, against her mother’s wish, because they share different ideology or perception on marriage and life in general. Her environment does not subdue her to accept Maks as a means for survival; rather it gives her the zeal to struggle for freedom, self-actualization and self-identity.

3. The Self-Reliant and Dependent Females

The environment is the basic character-mould in *The Fourth World*. The effect this has on the female characters is either it breaks them or make them stronger. These female characters are divided into the self-reliant or independent females and the dependent females. Kodili, Lolo, Ogom and Mama Egodi represent dependent females. Kodili depends on Chira for her survival, Lolo depends on her husband’s wealth to gain class status, Ogom depends on people’s opinion in taking decisions and Mama Egodi depends partially from the proceeds made by her children and neighbours for their feeding. Unlike Ogom and Mama Egodi, Kodili and Lolo have a low esteem about females’ capabilities as presented by the narrator through Chira’s stream of consciousness “Lolo and Kodili were the same in a way. Neither believed in young women forging a life of their own or in young women hankering after higher education” (pp. 115-116). Both women are shaped by their environment and cultural background.

On the other hand, Chira, Miss K., Agatha, Dr Ajali and Dr Bosa belong to same category of independent and self-reliant women. In Chira, the reader experiences the stage-to-stage growth just as Barthes expresses that “to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next” (p. 87). Initially, Chira tries relying on people for financial help, job and others but when all fails her, she summons courage and decides that “she was going to rely only on herself” (311). This determination enables her to reject Maks’ marriage proposal which many young women will gladly accept; believing in her capabilities makes her a survivor and nudges her towards her dream of attaining a university degree.

4. Conclusion

A great prose writer is not measured by just the number of prose written but his/her ability to address burning issues inherent among humanity through a unique and stylistic way. Since literature represents life as lived by people, *The Fourth World* is not just developed from existents in the African society but it encompasses existents in different continents of the world where some people are marginalized and denied access to the governance of their state and country; where there is poor accessibility of food, shelter and cloth by some people who are the victims of poor governance. Through this novel, Okoye has proven to be a great writer with her ability to present different burning issues inherent in the society. The gradual unravelling of the themes through a feministic perspective gives the reader a taste of a rich African fiction. In the analysis of the novel all the questions posed at the beginning of the work and also more not stated are answered. Though the novel is set in an urban area, the presence of nature and its interrelationship with the female gender render ecofeminism and environmental psychology as an intertwining mode of criticizing a fictional work. It is verified that the major causes of sufferings among women are culture which promotes gender inequality, environmental damages that are propelled mainly by the men at the higher echelon of power and the marginalization of women in the governance of both family and country. These causes lead the heroine, Chira, to embark on a journey for self-identity and a better living condition. In the African society which influences the world of the novel, it can be observed that the governance in most of its countries is dominated by the male gender who makes major decisions and policies with little consideration of the adverse effect of these decisions and policies on the poor and environment in general; at the end, the women suffers more.

Though Okoye tries to create an equilibrium in character representation in her novel by representing both good male characters (Jude and Mirror Head) and bad female characters (Matron, Miss Fasiba and Apia), she fails to portray the males, who do not die off early like their counterparts, as victims of environmental degeneration. Could it be because she presents her messages from a feministic point of view, focusing her attention more on the female characters? But it is necessary to note that as a novel portrays element of realism, vital details about realism should not be neglected. Apart from criticizing the men in power as the source of environmental degeneration, she also points out that some females are led into sufferings by their fellow females whose perception about life have been shaped by their environment. These female characters do not only accept the culture which degrades them but propagates these beliefs or culture already instituted by the male gender. Also she presents strong female characters and frail ones like Kodili (who becomes unproductive after her husband’s death) and Nebolisa (who runs mad due to the death of her husband and children). In the job sector, she presents segregation experienced by Chira who is denied job just because of her gender.

The successful acquisition of a job in the university at the end of the novel symbolizes that a female/woman, no matter her background or experience in life, can attain a higher position/goals (which she maps out for herself) only if she believes in herself, adopts hardworking, remain focused and acquire patience as a virtue. The strident advocacy of nature and the female gender in Okoye’s novel is an awakening call for change to a better present and future among females’ well-being and the society at large.

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