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## Mother Earth, Gender and Biblical Imagination

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## **X. Mother Earth, Gender and Biblical Imagination**

*Musa W. Dube*

God, the unique source of all creation makes all that exists sacred. In African Religion, God is present to and in more than human beings. Creation and other beings are the ambit of God. This theocentrism is the beginning of women's ecotheology. Most African women live close to nature; we are in touch with our rural economies and cultures and, therefore, with the ethic and spirituality of our primal religion which requires us to be sensitive to both the visible and invisible world as domains with God.

(Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 2001:46)

### **Storytelling: Mother Earth and the Woman**

According to Genesis 2, God creates a man from dust, places him in a garden and brings every animal to him to be named by him. Whatever he names an animal that is what it becomes. God realises that a man is still lonely. God sends the man to sleep and creates a woman from him and for him. A woman is brought to him for naming. He names her and happily declares her the bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, for she was created from him. Together, they live happily in the garden of Eden, eating from the garden and taking care of the garden. Things take a huge change when a woman listens to a snake, eating the fruit in the middle of the garden. Consequently, human beings are taken out of God's garden and the ground/Earth is cursed due to a woman's sin. The harmonious co-existence of human beings with nature is thus broken, supposedly because of a woman's desire to have wisdom and collaboration with an animal, a snake. From

henceforth, humanity, and possibly the Earth, needs salvation, because a woman (Eve) was tempted by the snake and succumbed to its tricks (Genesis 2 & 1 Tim 2).

The subjugation of women and the Earth thus undergirds Christian/biblical understanding of salvation, for at the centre of its theological imagination is patriarchy and anthropocentrism. While patriarchy is a male-centred ideology that empowers the male sex in economic, social, cultural and political structures (Dube 2016:144-154), anthropocentrism, on the other hand is philosophy that believes human beings are the most important members of the Earth and that all that is in the Earth was created for the endless enjoyment of human beings (Habel 2010:114-125). Yet we still need to ask: What are some Earth-friendly aspects of Genesis 2 and other biblical texts? Can women subscribe to a concept of salvation that is patriarchal and anthropocentric, without subscribing to their own oppression? (Eaton 2000:54-71). How can sin be re-named and re-imagined? How can religious salvation be re-imagined to liberate to the whole creation community? (Kinoti 2006; Rhoads and Rossing 2010:128-143; Habel 2010:114-125). How do other religions imagine the Earth community, gender and salvation? These are some of the questions that scholars contributing to this volume and using different theories and methods were invited to interrogate, theologise and to recommend useable interpretations to their faith communities in the quest for a healthy and liberating relationship with the Earth community especially in the context of contemporary global environmental crisis.

## **Defining the Problem: Gender and Global Environmental Crisis**

As the Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth SDGs) underline: *“there is no country in the world that is not experiencing first hand drastic effects of climate change. Greenhouse emissions continue to rise, and are now 50% higher than their 1990 level”* (2016:13). (Emphasis added.) Indeed, research is increasingly showing that while global warming is

undoubtedly an unfolding tragedy for all of us, indications are that the poor members of our communities will become even poorer (McFague 2008:22).<sup>1</sup> *SADC Gender Protocol 2012 Barometer*, points out that “While climate change affects everyone, it does not affect everyone equally. The poor and the vulnerable in Africa and other developing countries... suffer the most as they experience violence, exclusion and loss of sovereignty over natural resources. Women make up 70% of those the worlds’ poor and this places them on the frontline of coping with disproportionate climate impacts. Of the people who die in the climate-induced natural disasters 85% are women, while 75% of environmental refugees are women” (2012:342). Similarly, *SADC Gender Protocol 2018 Barometer* points out that

Women and girls constitute the majority of those impacted by the effects of climate change and environmental degradation... Along with the projected reduction in rainfall and increase in temperatures across large parts of the region, experts expect climate change will significantly affect productivity in the agricultural sector... climate change therefore presents a serious threat to food security and livelihoods, particularly among the poor segments of the population in the rural areas. Whilst women own less than 10% of land, they are key managers of the land (2018:23).

In various ways, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight Earth crisis and call for Earth Care. Formulated in 2016, SGD’s “are universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.” According to SDG goal 15,

Human and Other animals rely on other forms of life on land for food, clean air, clean water, and as means of combating climate change. Plant life makes up to 80% of Human diet. Forests, which cover 30% of the Earth’s surface, help to keep the air and water clean and the Earth’s climate in balance...Yet the land and life on it are in trouble. Arable land is disappearing 30-35 times faster than it has historically. Deserts are spreading. Animal breeds are going extinct. We can turn the trends around.

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<sup>1</sup> Sally McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 22.

SDG goal number one, whose mandate is to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere,” observes that “gender inequality plays a large part in perpetuating poverty and its risks” while pointing out “that the threats brought by climate change, conflict and food insecurity mean even more work is needed to bring people out of poverty” (SDG 1). Given these global, continental and localised challenges the *Africa Agenda 2063* pledges that, “Africa will participate in global efforts for climate change mitigation that support and broaden the policy space for sustainable development on the continent” (Africa Agenda 2063). This volume on *Mother Earth Mother Africa and Biblical Imagination*, seeks to participate in these conversations, concerns and to generate solutions both at global and specific African contexts, by interrogating religious/cultural/theological and philosophical resources for their constructions and imaginations of the Earth; by interrogating their impact, usability and need for re-imagination and re-interpretation, where necessary.

This book seeks to interrogate the intersection of gender and other social categories with the construction of the Earth in various biblical texts. This undertaking is crucial for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an Africa wide association of scholars, whose mandate is to analyse all religious and cultural traditions for their constructions of gender and how it impacts the lives of women as well as to re-interpret them for the empowerment of women and their communities. Needless to say climate change has and will continue to have a major impact on African women, who depend on the land and subsistence farming to feed their families and children. When rains fail, not only women find their workload doubled as they have to walk longer distance to fetch waters, food security is also highly impacted, leading to ill-health and death (Oduyoye 2001:46-50, 96-100). Environmental health is central to African women and their communities’ wellbeing, hence the significance of this book in order to inform and train faith-based organisations on the demands such a context will lay on mission and pastoral care.

Academically, it is particularly crucial to undertake this research project since a recent analysis of African theological scholars, and African women scholars of religion/culture/theology and philosophy in particular, noted that, “What does Christian Environmental thought look

like in Africa? We wish we could show more of it. Searching, for example, through recent publications of leading scholars in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians—some of the most socially attuned and reformed-minded theologians of the continent—turned up no relevant texts” (Carpenter & Kooistra 2013:81-82).<sup>2</sup>

This volume, together with six other volumes<sup>3</sup> undertaken by African women theologians, is a major step towards attending to this gap.

### **Mother Earth: Religion, Colonialism, Global Commerce and Technology**

In his 1967 now classic article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White discredits and credits religious/cultural beliefs regarding the environmental sustainability. First, he identifies some biblical texts and Christian religion as anthropocentric, giving human beings dominion over nature, thereby sanctioning the exploitation

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<sup>2</sup> The evaluation was harsh and pronounced hastily because Mercy Oduyoye’s work has always explicitly mainstreamed environmental concerns. This is evident, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. New York: Orbis Press, 2001, 46-50, 96-100. Besides, the fact that Musa W. Dube postcolonial approach centres the Earth and the taking of it from the indigenous people and the destruction of their Earth-friendly beliefs, she has published two Earth-centred papers prior to this hasty evaluation, which was obviously not thorough in its research before passing judgement. These include: Dube, M. W. “Inhabiting God’s Garden: Are We in the Global Village or in God’s Garden?” *Ministerial Formation* 96. (2002): 31-37 and Dube, Musa W. “And God Saw that it was Good! An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1,” *Black Theology* Vol.13/3 (2015):1-17.

<sup>3</sup> The volumes emanate from the July 1-4, 2019 Circle of Concerned African Women Conference, which was the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and which also focused on the theme of Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Religious Imagination. Two volumes are already published (*Theologisches Afrika*, in *FAMA Feministisch Politisch Theologisch* 2019 Volume 4 and Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni, et al. *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*. Cape Town: Sun Press Media, 2020) while the rest are still forthcoming.

and destruction of our ecological systems. He points to Genesis 1:26-27, where God supposedly blessed human beings and gave them the right to have dominion over the Earth and over all living things, in addition to the injunction to multiply and fill the Earth. People of biblical faith and cultures have thus believed human beings to be the most important creatures over all other members of the creation community, argues White. Moreover, he maintains that human beings have felt entitled to use the Earth recklessly and exploitatively given the religious belief that they have been given “dominion over the Earth and over all other living beings.”

With the advance of western science, technology and modern colonialism, White asserts that the anthropocentric perspectives of the Biblical faith were given precedence over native cultural beliefs, which often held that every member of the creation community, animate and inanimate, had a divine spirit. In such beliefs, mountains, forests, trees and all animals were held to have divine identity. Consequently, those who sought to kill an animal or to cut a tree, for example, had to seek the divine permission to hunt and eat any animal, often characterised by praying at the feet of a killed animal thus seeking divine permission to eat it. White holds such native/primitive beliefs associated divinity with all members of creation and restrained human beings from believing themselves to be above all members of creation and having the right to recklessly use resources of the Earth. In this argument, White highlights that religious/cultural beliefs can be both detriment and positive towards environmental sustainability—calling for analysis, re-reading and retrieving of our texts for environmental sustainability.

According to White, modern western colonialism and its accompanying Christianisation of the world had tragic impact on the Earth, in the sense that native religious/cultural beliefs that were Earth-Friendly were suppressed through the promotion of biblical beliefs over indigenous beliefs. Modern colonisation itself was violence over the Earth, for as Edward Said maintains, it did not only cover 85% of the Earth, it also involved the taking of the Earth from those whose noses are flatter and those whose colours are darker (1992). Such taking of the Earth from the other, in Modern colonialism, was in itself an environmental oppression, since natives were often moved from their fertile lands and fair settlements into some crowded and arid

areas (Dube 2014:139-156). Native lands were also subjected to commercial needs of the colonisers, with massive chunks of land cleared for the masters' plantations, thereby destroying ecological systems. The process led to overcrowding for some areas; destruction of some species; massive removal of trees; stress on ecological systems as well as pollution of the environment through farm chemicals, among others. Unfortunately, the Christian mission, accompanying modern colonialism regarded itself as a mission to save the lost souls (Matt 28:16-20) than a mission to the whole creation as proposed by Mark 16:5 (Rhoads 2005:165-184 & Habel 2010:114-125). The modern Christian mission understood its mandate as to free indigenous people from their religions, cultures and practices, which more often than not, recognised the sanctity of all members of the creation community (Young 2015:168-171).

To subdue the Earth through colonialism and Christianity was also a gendered approach, that often regarded the Earth and the targeted countries as females, who had to be entered and dominated. This oppression of the land translated into oppressing of women, who through their priestly roles were often overseers of rituals of honoring and respecting the Earth. Through their traditional role as farmers, herbalists, water and fire keepers, African women had a closer relationship with the land. The taking of the land from them through colonialism and the religious/cultural dispossession often translated into disempowerment of African women. This is documented by the anthropological work of Ife Amadiume (1987) in West Africa and Jean John Commaroff in Southern Africa (1997).

The destruction of the Earth by dualistic and hierarchical western religious/cultural/theological philosophical thoughts, colonialism and concepts of development have now reached worldwide proportions, affecting the whole Earth as described above. African scholars and women thus need to interrogate both indigenous and received traditions for how they construct the Earth and gender, with the intent to understand, analyse, re-construct, reimagine and re-use where necessary and helpful. Such an effort will involve, exploration of African, biblical, theological World Religions and philosophical perspectives



of Earth and gender in order to retrieve, analyse, re-imagine and re-construct cultural/religious and philosophical tradition to address contemporary environmental crisis.

## **Liberation of the Earth and the Oppressed**

Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian, has insisted that the cry of the poor is interlinked with the cry of the Earth (2012). In so doing, Boff underlines that the oppression of people is often, if not always, linked to the oppression of the Earth. He intersects environmental crisis with class oppression (Bouma- Prediger 2004). Since liberation theology bids us to be in solidarity with the oppressed, to hear their voices and to take their sides, recognising the Earth as oppressed, bids us to take sides with the Earth in our various liberation theologies. A liberation theology that focuses on human beings without taking cognisance of the oppression of the Earth, cannot be a liberation theology, for it embraces the oppression of the Other, Mother Earth. Liberation theology, of any form that sidelines the Earth is ultimately not a liberation theology, for it functions with capitalism, neo-liberalism, patriarchy, anthropocentrism, hierarchy and dualistic views that imagines salvation/liberation as human-centred, partial and inadequate.

It follows that justice, mission, salvation, gender relations and ecclesiology must be re-imagined in the context of global environmental crisis. Worship that does not only include a congregation of human beings, but admits into its gathering the whole creation calls into being new Faith-Based Communities and new theologies (Habel 2010:114-125). What does it mean to do mission? (Rhoads & Rossing 2010:128-143) What is salvation? How is the Divine/God imagined in the Creation community? How should gender relations be imagined? What is hospitality, given the number of people who will (are) be displaced by climate change? How should we theologise from the angle of inevitable migration and induced poverty? How else should we re-imagine the concept of being a people of faith in this age of globalisation of climate change and global displacement? How should we

re/read scriptures/texts in the light of global environmental crisis? How can Earth-friendly manuals be produced for faith communities and their leaders? Clearly, theological/religious/cultural/philosophical thinking needs to disavow patriarchal and anthropocentric perspectives, expressed by global economic systems that are exploitative, to re-imagine a new Earth community of being; namely the whole creation community gathering and living in full acknowledgement and respect of its Creator and one another.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Whereas global environmental crisis are linked to gender oppression and are threatening the future of life on Earth, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, whose agenda is to research religious/cultural/philosophical traditions for gender construction and to reimagine these sources from a perspective that empowers women and all members of the Earth Community, has not yet carried a continent wide research, through its members, to interrogate how the Earth is imagined in cultural/religious/theological/philosophical sources and how such perspectives might still be user-friendly for today's crisis, or require re-margination//re-interpretation from a sustainable development perspectives. Through its Africa wide membership, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians seeks to carry out a continent-wide research project to investigate how the Earth is constructed in cultural/ religious/ theological/ philosophical traditions in order to analyze their relevance to the contemporary environmental crisis at local and global stage as well as to re-imagine and re-interpret available perspectives in the light of contemporary environmental crisis. Outputs of the project can provide Earth-friendly perspectives for empowering Faith-Based Communities and leaders to effectively address contemporary environmental crisis within their congregations and larger society. This volume on Mother Earth, Mother Africa and the Bible falls within this wider agenda of the Circle, which will be carried out for the next five years (2019-2024).

## **Specific Objectives:**

**This thematic research project of the Circle seeks to:**

1. Highlight global, continental and local impact of environmental crisis on African women and the communities
2. Highlight the link between Earth and gender oppression at global, continental and local contexts
3. Investigate how the Earth is imagined in cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources
4. Analyze the usability of perspectives provided by cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources
5. Re-imagine and re-interpret perspectives provided by cultural/ religious/theological and Philosophical resources in the light of contemporary environmental crisis
6. Design Earth-friendly interpretative frameworks for faith-communities and leaders to address contemporary environmental crisis
7. Use new frameworks to train religious communities on Earth-friendly ways of relating with the Earth

## **Research Questions**

1. How are African women impacted by contemporary environmental crisis in my region, country and globally?
2. What is the Link between gender and Earth oppression in a particular context and faith tradition?
3. How is the Earth conceptualised in African cultural/ religious/theological and philosophical thinking?
4. Does the analysis of the African cultural/religious/theological and philosophical perspectives of the Earth and gender yield

user-friendly concepts for today's policy makers and environmental challenges?

5. How can we re-interpret or re-imagine some African cultural/religious/theological and philosophical perspectives on gender and the Earth for the liberation of the creation community?
6. How can we design Earth-friendly interpretative frameworks that empowers Faith-based organisations to be socially engaged in addressing environmental crisis within their congregations and communities?

The above objectives and research questions are undertaken on the assumption that cultural, religious, theological and philosophical traditions have influential perspectives and attitudes about Earth-keeping that needs to be fully investigated, understood, evaluated, re-interpreted/re-imagined for application to address the contemporary global environmental crisis.

## **Methodology**

Following the tradition of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the chosen theme is to be approached by its continent wide and diaspora members, from their particular areas of specialisation and contexts. Members first in a Pan African conference to share and discuss their findings and thereafter disperse to their respective regions, countries and institution, where they continue to research on the agreed theme from various religious perspectives. That is, scholars of African Indigenous Religions, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, the Bible, Ethics, etc. are expected to:

1. Describe their local, regionally and globally contexts, highlighting gender, class, ethnic and Earth intersections
2. Choose the most appropriate theories and apply them for analysis of their particular traditions and texts
3. Those who choose to carry out fieldwork to collect data, would decide to either use qualitative or quantitative methods

4. (Texts-based scholars would) apply hermeneutically-appropriate methods of their choice for reading, analysis and re-imagination
5. Generate new methods and theories from their contexts, texts and data
6. Submit their developed papers to the research leaders of their particular areas for consideration
7. Receive feedback from reviewers, for upgrading the paper for final submission to editor/leader of the sub-theme

This volume seeks to address the above stated theme, contexts, objectives and research questions from the perspective of biblical studies. Contributors utilise various theories, methods and African cultures to generate readings that assist us to address contemporary Earth crisis. This, however, is the beginning of a journey in conversation with the worldwide scholars of the Bible, environment and gender.

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