

An Ecofeminist Reading of Egara Kabaji's *The Blacksmith, His Pregnant Wife and the Ogre*

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Abstract

Media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter and WhatsApp are becoming popular podiums on which global oral literatures are staged and consumed in contemporary society. As the world and media evolve, African oral literature continues to become more vibrant on these platforms where presentation of audio-visual texts is common. Thus, this paper focuses on the YouTube narrative by Egara Kabaji: "The Blacksmith, His Pregnant Wife and the Ogre" and explores representations of feminine subjugation in the natural world through the lens of ecocriticism and ecofeminism in particular. The paper examines the ways in which the narrative represents the relationship between women and the environment. The study further shows how this connection reflects the domineering patriarchal structures in African landscapes. An eco-consumption of both oral and visual texts in the narrative displays local and global ecological concerns that are related to climate change and environmental injustices fuelled by repressive human and non-human constructions that operate against the feminine. The study examines how a fight against environmental injustices and repressive patriarchal systems would offer a solution to the woman's problem. This study however, acknowledges the pivotal role that man plays in fighting against feminist oppression and ending environmental injustices.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Environment, Youtube, Climate Change, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION TO ECOCRITICISM AND ECOFEMINISM

In the recent years, there has been an increased concern and discourses about environment and the role of humankind in its conservation, as captured in the United Nations declaration that 'declining biodiversity does not solely impact the material welfare and livelihoods of people; it also cripples access to security, resiliency, social relations, health, and freedom of choices and actions' (UN – Women Watch 2009). This concern has notably been transferred into literature, with many literary authors focusing on landscapes. The last part of 20th century has been marked by increased approach and interpretation of literary texts through a green lens. Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between nature and humanity. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his work *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. In his work, Rueckert emphasizes on the need to desist from malevolent destruction of nature, the need to develop ecological vision and the significance of becoming eco-conscious.

Many authors today, including those in the digital space, posit a dire need for the whole world to urgently address the issue of ecocide and sensitize people to take care of nature. There is a worrying concern that the level of carbon dioxide on the planet today was last equalled more than 4 million years ago. Increased greenhouse gas emissions are to blame for the rise in global temperatures

which again contribute to global calamities like devastating forests and bush fires in US and Australia, locust swarming in Africa, Asia and Middle East, droughts and crop failures, heatwaves in Antarctica and other parts of the world and mass extinction of Arctic regions and mountain caps. There is also a worrying rise in sea levels which is already threatening to displace those living near water bodies like seas, oceans and lakes. Human activities are majorly to blame for this degradation of nature, and women take the greatest percentage of the human population. This means that more women than men engage in destructive human activities and are more exposed to the negative effects of nature; and it would thus be expected that women should play a bigger role in reconnecting humankind and nature. Ecocriticism and its strands like eco-Marxism, eco-post colonialism and ecofeminism are some of the modern literary interventions to restoration of nature.

Eco-critics pay attention to the relationship between cultural products and nature. They examine how culturally produced texts like oral narratives, novels, poems, plays, songs and visual productions like films and artwork represent interactions between human beings and the natural environment. Literature, from the eco-critic point of view, is a massive and continually growing repertoire of creative energy which cannot be depleted. Ecocriticism thus pays attention to the relationship between cultural products and nature.

With the increasing worldwide concern on environmental degradation especially in the recent years, writers all over the world have been active in calling for eco-consciousness. Their work focuses global concerns like plastic pollution which has become a world menace. It is reported that the world produces 300 million tonnes of plastic waste each year, with around 14 million tonnes of it making its way to the ocean. There is minimal recycling of the plastics. Deforestation is another global concern, with the highest levels of deforestation experienced in Brazil especially in the Amazon forest, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia. If deforestation is not dealt with, the world may have only 10% of its forests by 2030. Air pollution is also a major threat to the environment. World Health Organization (WHO) data shows that approximately 4.2 to 7 million people die from air pollution worldwide every year. Nine out of ten people breathe air that contains high levels of pollutants. In Africa, 258,000 people died as a result of outdoor air pollution in 2017. Writers tend to write about their landscapes, consequently, a lot of eco-critically charged literary texts in the contemporary world represent the current menace in their immediate environment.

One of the core strands of ecocriticism is ecofeminism which was coined in 1974 by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (*Feminism or Death*). She relates gendered violence and the degradation of the planet to patriarchal domination thus bringing together feminism and environmentalism, affirming that there is a mutual relationship between women and nature. Both the woman and 'mother nature' are exploited by patriarchal systems and capitalism; d'Eaubonne's works reflect such exploitations quite convincingly.

Feminism, a women-led movement, gained popularity in the early 1800s. It basically advocates for an end to sexism, by striving for social justice for those who have been oppressed by patriarchy. It is concerned with bringing equal rights for women in the social, academic, professional and political arena. In the West, the women have greatly gained from feminist advocacies. Recently, intersectional feminism has been focusing a lot on women of colour, women with disabilities, queer and transgender women, women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, nationality, religion and lately ecofeminism which deals with women's role in the conservation of nature. d'Eaubonne also expounds on the relationship between environmental struggle and the fight against patriarchy. In 1978, she created the organisation 'Ecologie-Féminisme,' though it did not

become popular in France, it created much environmental awareness. Other important ecofeminists from the West are Maria Mies of Germany and Starhawk of USA. South Asia is well represented by Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist focused on the Third World women's role in environmental conservation, whose major work delves into Indian rural women's experiences of environmental damage.

In Latin America, ecofeminism remains vibrant, especially among indigenous women fighting to protect the Amazon in Brazil and against drilling, mining, and logging in Ecuador. In the latter case, ecofeminists link gendered violence to extraction of resources. Women are more exposed to sexual and domestic violence when extraction activities and companies are set in their indigenous territory. Africa has also produced popular ecofeminist figures like Mariama Sonko of Senegal, Ruth Nyambura (a Kenyan environmentalist activist) and the late Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai. Thus there are notable concerted efforts from both men and women in the fight for ecological restoration and against feminine oppression. In the digital spaces, like YouTube, Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter and WhatsApp, eco-critically charged texts such as oral narratives portray authors' efforts in mitigating violence against women and the environment. This paper, thus, relies on the lens of ecofeminism to examine how Kabaji's oral narrative: "The Blacksmith, His Pregnant Wife and the Ogre" represents local and global ecological concerns about exploitation of nature and how oppressive constructions against women worsen the situation.

Ecofeminism and Feminization of Nature in Kabaji's Production

In *Google Arts and Culture*, The National Museums of Kenya expounds on the history and culture of the Kikuyu Community of Kenya. One of the major traditional economic activities among the Agikuyu was blacksmithing. The Kikuyu blacksmiths, commonly referred to as *aturi* (or *muturi* in singular form) made knives and weapons like spears and swords from iron ore, which was excavated from the ground and smelted. They made spears such as the one used by *Muturi*, the pregnant woman's husband, in Kabaji's story to kill the ogre. The famous Kikuyu traditional digging knife, *kahiukairima*, had its handle carved from *Murembu* (*Ehretiacymosa*) wood.

Evident from Kabaji's audio-visual narrative, traditional blacksmithing caused environmental pollution in various ways. First the process of excavation of ore left the earth bare and vulnerable to erosion. Secondly, the process of blacksmithing (hand forging) involved heating which was done in a forge that was fuelled by charcoal or firewood and this caused air pollution and the threat of desertification because trees had to be felled to provide heat. This effect is clear in Kabaji's production. The ground from where the blacksmiths work is bare and exposed, and the trees are ash grey probably from the ore dust and heat. Further, forging is a loud process. Blacksmithing includes banging, a process which causes noise pollution. In Kabaji's film the blacksmiths are isolated and work from the depths of the forest as a way of avoiding disruption to others. However, they too are exposed to noise pollution which may cause hearing problems. Men in the narrative engage in this disastrous economic activity while women are left behind to take care of homes.

The traditional blacksmithing practices of the Agikuyu, as portrayed in Kabaji's narrative, can be understood through an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism links the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, both of which are perpetuated by patriarchal systems. In this narrative, men engage in environmentally destructive activities such as blacksmithing, leading to soil erosion, deforestation, air and noise pollution. The excavation of iron ore and the cutting down of

trees for fuel symbolizes the domination of nature, reflecting similar patterns of control and marginalization of women in the society.

Additionally, the narrative emphasizes a clear gendered division of labour, where men are involved in blacksmithing—an activity that harms the environment—while women are restricted to domestic roles, responsible for managing the household. This aligns with ecofeminist critiques of how men's economic ventures often rely on exploiting natural resources, while women, more closely connected to nature, bear the consequences of environmental damage. The isolation of blacksmiths in the forest serves as a metaphor for their detachment from nature and their role in its degradation.

Through an ecofeminist lens, this story reveals the intertwined dynamics of environmental destruction and women's marginalization. The damage caused by blacksmithing reflects a broader pattern of domination within patriarchal societies, where both nature and women are subordinated for economic gain, reinforcing cycles of exploitation and control.

Digital spaces provide a platform for ecological imagination, illustrating how the crises facing the natural world can be comprehended and addressed through human creativity. Among these digital creations, Kabaji's eco-critically infused oral-visual narrative exemplifies this effort, highlighting ecological injustices perpetrated by oppressive human and non-human forces, particularly against women. Much like traditional feminism, ecofeminism centres on the theme of exploitation. Just as marginalized women—racialized, enslaved, or disabled—are subject to oppression, so too are land and plant life, which become naturalized spaces for experimentation, domination, and subjugation. In the film, events largely unfold in a forest, where both the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment take place. From an ecofeminist perspective, the forest symbolizes a gendered space where ecological and feminine oppression, as well as liberation, coexist.

The narrative presents a man who, compelled by his duty to provide for his family, ventures into the depths of the forest to practice blacksmithing, leaving his pregnant wife behind. While his circumstances may justify his actions, his choice to abandon his wife is portrayed as reckless and oppressive, as it exposes her to the dangers of the forest. Ecofeminist analysis underscores the parallel between the woman's vulnerability and environmental degradation. The man's involvement in blacksmithing, a destructive economic enterprise, leads to soil erosion, air pollution, and noise pollution, furthering the exploitation of nature. This dynamic reinforces patriarchal dominance, as the man's actions elevate him to a position of power while leaving both the woman and nature in a state of vulnerability.

While the man is absent, the woman forms a close bond with the vulnerable animals in her environment. From an ecofeminist standpoint, this relationship mirrors what Lori Gruen, in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* describes as “the subservient status of women and animals” (62) within male-dominated spaces. The portrayal of the woman's body as smaller, weaker, and primarily reproductive restricts her from participating in destructive, male-dominated economic activities like ore extraction and hunting, instead positioning her as a nurturer, a life-bringer, which is perceived as inferior. She nourishes the dove by feeding it castor oil, emphasizing her role as a caregiver.

Gruen argues that ecofeminist theory must address the joint oppression of women, nature, and non-human animals, contending that it must consider the subjugation of animals alongside environmental and gendered exploitation (61). In Kabaji's narrative, the woman's intimate connection with the dove symbolizes her bond with nature, contrasting with the man's lack of such

a connection. While the woman understands and nurtures the animals, the man remains disconnected from the natural world, reinforcing the ecofeminist critique of male detachment and domination over both nature and women.

The blacksmith, acting independently in his economic pursuits, chooses to engage in blacksmithing without regard for its environmental consequences or his wife's emotions. This decision not only creates a physical and emotional divide between him and his family but also underscores his insensitivity to the natural world. Both the woman and nature are relegated to the status of the insignificant "other." In a parallel to his treatment of the woman, the blacksmith's actions symbolize the feminization of nature. Both the woman and nature are subjugated and dominated, enduring abandonment and exploitation within a patriarchal system.

Echoing the insights of Ashenafi Belay Adugna and Sena Gonfa Tullu in their study, *Symbolic Representation of Nature and Women in Oromo Oral Narratives*, a profound connection is observed between women and nature. On the other hand, men exhibit a degree of detachment from both. Men are portrayed as detached from nature and animals because of "(t)heir depiction as antagonistic to them" (145) while women seem to establish affinity between themselves and the animals on account of their weakness. This bond is exemplified through the woman's interaction with nature and animals, as seen when a dove assists her in summoning her husband in a moment of need. The symbiotic relationship between the woman and nature is further highlighted by her sharing of castor nuts with the bird, symbolizing mutual support. In stark contrast, the man remains not only physically distant from his wife but also emotionally disconnected from nature and animals. This is illustrated by the dove's repeated attempts to convey the wife's distress to the blacksmith, who is slow to grasp the message. The dove's role in bridging this gap underscores the symbolic connection between women and nature, while also reflecting the antagonism between men and the natural world.

In Kabaji's narration, a symbolic link emerges between the reproductive capacities of women and nature, both of which are feminized in their shared ability to nurture and give life. Nature, much like women, is depicted as fertile and capable of sustaining life, as seen when the castor oil is derived from nature to feed the dove, and when the ogre provides sustenance to the pregnant woman. However, as Adugna and Tullu observe, "both the earth and women are related to man in the same manner" (148). These scholars argue that the tilling of land serves as a metaphor for the violation of the earth, akin to the image of sexual intercourse that is necessary for female reproduction. In Kabaji's narrative, this metaphor is taken further, with blacksmithing—seen as an activity that leaves the land barren—and the harvesting of firewood by the ogre, symbolizing the rape of the earth. This imagery closely parallels the sexual intercourse that resulted in the blacksmith impregnating his wife. Both nature and women are portrayed as fertile, with the capacity for life-giving regeneration, yet they are simultaneously dominated by men—through exploitative actions against nature and through their role in reproduction.

The narrative also emphasizes the vulnerability of feminine qualities in both women and nature, such as beauty, softness, and fragility, which are threatened by masculine activities. A stark contrast is drawn between the untouched areas of the forest and those scarred by blacksmithing. The destructive economic activity strips nature of its beauty, leaving the land bare and desolate. Similarly, the blacksmith neglects his pregnant wife, abandoning her to the cruelty of the ogre, who denies her food and leaves her weak and near death. The ogre's mistreatment of the woman parallels his exploitation of the environment; from which he relentlessly harvests firewood. Both

the man and the ogre embody patriarchal traits that are not only exploitative toward nature but also toward women, thereby stripping both of their natural beauty and vitality.

According to Gruen, ecofeminism should strive to establish “connections between woman and nature and offering alternative conceptions of how we should live in the world” (60). Kabaji’s narrative aligns with Gruen’s vision, as it presents a resolution where the young blacksmith abandons his harmful economic pursuits and re-establishes a connection with both the woman and nature. The subjugation of women ends when the man ceases his exploitative practices toward the environment, signifying the critical role of men in ecological restoration. This transformation highlights that harmony between humans and nature can only be achieved through cooperation between men and women. The blacksmith’s decision to leave his destructive profession and reunite with his family, coupled with his defeat of the oppressive ogre, symbolizes the role of men in combating both gender and ecological injustices. Through this narrative, Kabaji suggests that men must actively participate in the restoration of balance and equality by rejecting patriarchal dominance and working in collaboration with women to heal both the environment and society.

In all, Kabaji’s narrative presents a compelling ecofeminist critique, drawing parallels between the exploitation of women and the degradation of nature within patriarchal systems. Both women and nature are feminized, depicted as life-giving yet subjected to domination by men through destructive activities such as blacksmithing and environmental exploitation. The narrative highlights the vulnerability of both entities, emphasizing how masculine economic pursuits strip nature of its beauty and vitality while exposing women to oppression. However, Kabaji’s resolution, where the blacksmith abandons his harmful actions and reconnects with both nature and his wife, underscores the potential for restoration through collaboration. This transformation reflects the ecofeminist call for men to reject patriarchal dominance, work alongside women, and participate in healing ecological and social injustices, ultimately advocating for a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment.

CONCLUSION

Kabaji’s narrative vividly portrays ecofeminist themes, particularly in the parallel treatment of nature and women within a patriarchal context. Both nature and women are feminized, subjected to domination, and exploitation in ways that mirror each other. The practice of blacksmithing symbolizes the destructive forces of male-driven economic ventures, which strip the environment of its vitality, much like the subjugation of women diminishes their autonomy and agency. While the woman in the story demonstrates a nurturing relationship with nature and animals, the man remains detached and disconnected from the ecological world. Despite this, Kabaji’s narrative suggests that men hold a critical role in addressing these intertwined injustices. Like the young blacksmith who ultimately abandons his destructive practices, men can choose to reject exploitative behaviours and, alongside women, take an active part in healing and sustaining both the natural world and gender relations. This shift underscores the potential for men to contribute meaningfully to ecological restoration and gender equality by fostering a collaborative, rather than exploitative, relationship with both women and nature.

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