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## The representation of women as agents of ecological and societal regeneration: A reading of *The Sacred Forest (1998)* and *Gaining the Game (2010)*

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#### Abstract

Ecological destruction traditionally is often considered as coterminous with irreparable devastation of the comfort and security of mankind. However, out of this situation emerges the desire to repair and avert future damage. In Africa, this obligation however seems to rest squarely on the shoulders of the women who have a more direct and closed relationship with nature than other members of society. The ecological harm by humans is both a source of discomfort and conflict, but which triggers changes in power dynamics and profound ecological regeneration. This paper is based on the premise that Inyang and Takwi present women as the main agents of ecological and social regeneration. It was guided by the following research questions: How does ecological destruction unfold in the plays? What are the effects of this ecological destruction? What is the role of women in solving this problem and how does it contribute to change in social dynamics? In line with the above research questions, emerges the hypothesis: Inyang and Takwi present ecological destruction as a source of discomfort and conflict but which triggers positive changes in power dynamics, and diverse ecological regeneration.

**Keywords:** destruction, ecology, emancipation, regeneration

#### Public Interest Statement

The ecological harm by humans is both a source of discomfort and conflict, but which triggers changes in power dynamics and profound ecological regeneration. This paper is based on the premise that Inyang and Takwi present women as the main agents of ecological and social regeneration.

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## Introduction

In centuries gone by, mankind has lived a relatively peaceful life sustained by the ecology. Even in times of huge ecological destruction like during the past two world wars and the scars left behind, nature continued to gradually heal itself and still unremittingly provided food and shelter for mankind. As Mishra (2016, p. 1) strengthens the point by saying that the “Earth has seen ages; the earth has seen civilizations emerging and dying; the earth has seen bombings; the earth has seen disaster ... it still stays”. Against this background nature is put at a higher pedestal that builds a reliable source of hope and certainly for humanity as a whole. In addition, Emmot (2013) says nature has been and still continues to provide the four basic and indispensable life support components: the Atmosphere, the Biosphere, the Cryosphere and the Hydrosphere. Man is thus subjected to continuously live a life sustained by nature. Donald Hughes’ (1995, p. 3) comment is more explicit as far as the relationship between mankind and the ecology is concerned. To him focus is on “... how mankind interacts with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and planets, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun” This leaves the undeniable implication of mankind’s complete dependence on nature and the consequent obligation to preserve it.

## Theoretical framework and literature review

This study is carried out within the spectrum of the Eco-feminist theory. Many scholars such as Karren Warren (1987) agree with Ynestra King that Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice and accepts the integrity of every living thing (qtd in Warren:10). In addition to this, Besthorn and Mcmillen (2002, p. 224).it illustrates the potential of women for bringing about an ecological revolution to guarantee human survival. Like the Anne Naes perspective of deep ecology, eco-feminists therefore advocate for the preservation of all living things irrespective of their practical utility. Consequently, a disrespect of this integrity is seen as the source of chaos in the human society and the natural world that harbours it. In addition, Mary Mellor opines that there is a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. In this paper nature and the woman have inherent power which can be used to redeem the society both from masculine shackles and the ecological damage. This damage usually born of the penchant to develop the environment is usually inimical in the long term to both nature and to man. Tyagi et al: (2014, p. 1491) emphasizes that “Environmental damage leads to the deterioration of the environment through the depletion of natural resources such as air, water, and soil; the destruction of the ecosystem and the extinction of wildlife”.

## Problem statement

Since human existence and survival is highly dependent on nature, a destruction of the latter implies disaster for the former. Ecological destruction in eco-narratives is consequently and intrinsically seen through the tragic frame. There is hardly any consideration of women as potential and viable agents of renewed positive eco-development and sustainability. This

work therefore sets out to demonstrate, from Ekpe Inyang's *The Sacred Forest* (1998) and Mathew Takwi's *Gaining the Game* (2010), that ecological destruction also offers women the opportunity to rescue the environment and the society. First, the repercussions of man's continuing assault on the natural world has awakened in many, an awareness of the need for corrective action- to halt further destruction of the planet. Thus in trying to curb the menacing ecological destruction, the efforts have resulted in reforestation and development of new eco-friendly laws. Secondly, the destruction has contributed to female reassertion of a regenerative role with respect to society and nature.

### **Eco-destruction, Culture, Traditional Authority and Power Dynamics**

Most African indigenous cultural practices are yoked to nature. The cultural beliefs place ancestors in nature and thus its destruction is, considered tantamount to damage of the home of the ancestors. By extension, it is a source of inconvenience to the living dead and therefore affects their relationship with their descendants. Hassan, Bashirat Onyinoyi (2014, p. 5) citing Berkes concurs that African culture is spiritually and materially integrated with the landscape. It thrives on traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge refers to the knowledge, practice and belief concerning the relationship of living beings to one another and to the physical environment, which is held by peoples in relatively non-technological societies with a direct dependence upon local resources. Worster (1993, p. 813) in line with the reciprocal relationships between humans and land further adds that nature is not just a "the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but also as an actor in the drama".

In Ekpe Inyang's *The Sacred Forest*, deforestation and the destruction of the habitat to many animals is done by the timber company in Ekon. The disaster that the Ekonians experience thereafter is attributed to some form of punishment from the ancestors for the destruction of their home in the sacred ancestral forest. Deforestation and loss of other biodiversity are not seen by the Ekon people as the source of destruction because their society is exposed to hazards in prior to unseen proportions and beyond rescue. Gabriele (2012) describes this as a ruthless exploitation of natural resources thus neglecting an examination of the individual and social origins of aggression and destruction. In Mathew Takwi's *Gaining the Game* the culture centres around a callous exploitation of the ecosystem for commercial gains in utter disregard for the impact on the ecology and mankind. From the wood and charcoal sellers to the hunters, they indiscriminately target the forest and the animals with unreserved zeal. Worse still, is the culture of planting the water draining eucalyptus trees around river beds. These trees help to desiccate the soil and further the probability of desertification and climate change.

Traditional authority within the African milieu which is controlled by patriarchal grounded policies is blamed for ecological crisis. It comprises a council of elders and men of title who on behalf of the community decide on laws governing the use of everything including the ecology. This implies when they fail the entire community suffers, and when they fail to think the community crumbles. In *The Sacred Forest* the Chief and the elders with regard to their failure in the face of the massive eco-destruction hide behind the escapist unproductive maxim that "You cannot mend broken eggs" (25). It is a pessimistic psychological disposition

that is not only limiting in itself but is not open to seeking alternative ways of mending the situation, nor considering the consultation of others like women in the community. This is evidence of resignation to fate and lack of alternatives which as Kiangi (2001, p. 68) warns, “Where there is no hope and vision, the people perish”. Chief Osere and his cohorts fail to realize that the situation in Gabriele’s (2012, p. 2) opinion insistently points “... to the necessity and urgency of social change” from any angle. In this case the women bring in the change required to redeem their society.

The politics surrounding timber and the forest shoves aside the ecological importance of the forest. The only existing communal ecological laws focus on the economic importance to the detriment of the former. This disorientation is exemplified through Chief Osere and his council of elders who are contented, “Our brothers at the coast had sent us a long, long letter. To educate us on the importance of Timber Company” (sic 24). They form the base of custodians who fail to see beyond the objectives and economic interest of the lumber company. Beyond this belief lie weak ecological laws and the subsequent alarming damage of the Ekon bionetwork. There is the near absence of documented laws regulating ecological exploitation thus giving the timber company the leverage to invade and ravage the forest. The architects of ecological exploitation hinge on the fact that “Tradition should not and must be allowed to stand between development and us” (20). Tradition is tainted with darkness and backwardness by their “... brothers living at the coast” (16). So the community falls prey to this fear of denigrating their culture as they accept the timber company. It is worth noting here that the development and importance of the timber company are not elaborated upon with respect to the ecological impact. Thus the economic dimension is projected to the fore at the detriment of the ecological disaster that comes along with it.

Unlike in *The Sacred Forest* where the traditional authority is lured into by unfulfilled promises of development, that of *Gaining the Game* is steeped in self-destruction. The people of Ala`azineh live through a traditional and unsustainable exploitation of the flora and fauna. Activities such as hunting of game, destruction of forest for charcoal, plank and wood selling, help to destroy the bionetwork. There is the existence of fluid laws interpreted by each individual according to his/her survival needs at moment and so the ecology is left vulnerable. Enhanced by unfriendly eco-liberal laws and practices the men unanimously reject the administration’s anti-hunting and other laws “... We must protest against this law” (67). The community assesses and rejects the administrative laws based on the assumptions that it is not generated by their culture. It is worth noting that in both texts the domains of activities are those in which women are near absent and so power rest in the hands of the men who take decisions based on their whims and caprices. This is principally due to the fact that they are not so close to nature nor suffer the direct impact of negative changes in nature, like the women.

Eco-destruction has significant socio-economic and political implications. Power has been wielded by men in *The Sacred Forest* and *Gaining the Game* until the ecological wreckage sets in. Elder’s lament reveals the magnitude of the eco-damage when he says: “I had experienced storms more terrible than this but never had I witnessed this type of damage. Our village is in ruins. Where are we going to get money to build new houses”? (21). The



expression of desperation shows not only the men as part of the casualty of the ecological destruction, but also, as a powerless group in the face of the calamity. It also exposes the fact that they think more of the material damage and how to rebuild the infrastructure and neglect the ecological damage which is the base of their survival. Furthermore, the crisis reveals nature as the only alternative for rebuilding in this context of generalized poverty. Out of this situation the women emerge as a veritable force to reckon with as they take part in and over pertinent decision-making in the face of the crisis. From women who have been relegated to the homesteads and farms, they are seen to speak and act in the public arena like the palace. They do not only attend the communal gatherings in the palace at the heat of the crisis but make their voices heard. In a typical patriarchal set up, Chief Osere says the entire clan; both men and women are obliged to make financial contributions towards solving their present plight. He authoritatively says “... But the problem is more crucial. Men and women must contribute money to hire a medicine man” (22). The women react:

Woman 1: You men often make these costly mistakes. Because you keep women out of decision-making. You say women have small brains, yet you are the ones who allow the timber men to abuse our forest.

Woman 2: And now why the women must be asked to pay for a mistake that is not theirs?

Woman 1: Are we not paying for it already? Do they know how we get water and firewood? They don't seem to care about the future of this land (24).

The women in the above excerpt attack the prejudices levelled against them and chide the men for relegating women to the background during vital decision-making gatherings. They outrightly accuse the men for being the vectors of destruction in the land and for being insensitive to the plight of the women in the face of the ecological destruction. These nameless women represent countless numbers in many societies over the world that suffer the same fate and are no longer willing to accept nor respect discriminatory power dynamics, nor condone with the abusive use of ecological resources dictated by the men. They are a microcosm of a macrocosm which according to Gabriele (2012: 4) pushes the entire society to “recognition of failure and error”. The women are not only seeking to change their plight as victims but to liberate nature which is seen as another victim from the destructive grip of men.

### **Women, Reforestation and Eco-laws**

From an attack of the enslaving patriarchal policies the women go to a practical approach to solve the ecological destruction. As a group that is oppressed by men and comforted by nature, these women envision a better life as they lead the process of re-afforestation ignoring the men who are now seen to be the ones with practically “small brains”. As seen through the stage directions in *The Sacred Forest*: “... villagers, mostly women, are working assiduously, planting trees in a deforested area” (24). The women thus prove they are indispensable members of the society who have a vital role to play as they liberate themselves from the grips of society and nature. These women have a close bond with nature through the various aspects of nature

they encounter on a daily basis like water, firewood, planting of crops, and cultivating the soil. Through this bond the women show an eco- understanding. That is why their strategies for re-naturalization are that which mediates between the ecology and humans; provide a springboard for sustainability and hope for the future. Subsequently, it can be inferred that their participation in the renewal of nature is also an opportunity to renew the position and role of the women in the Ekon society. The men though positioning women as a subordinate class, in their subconscious are aware that, even in the cultural sphere the latter are inherently powerful. That is why they ironically state that “The female juju is something to fear. Who no know say woman witch strong pass bone?” (12).

Out of the turbulent situation emerge new eco-sensibilities and sustenance strategies. The women spearhead the re-afforestation and regeneration process with a resolve not to allow any destruction to their ecology in future. The cross-gender, cross-generation and cross-age approach that they adopt is the best one which as Berg (2010, p. 439) says; “... provides an effective grassroots approach to ecology that emphasizes sustainability, community self-determination and (regional) self-reliance”. The Ekonians now know as they rightly conclude for once that their environment is as fragile as eggs. Consequently since “You cannot mend a broken egg” (25), it is better, to avoid breaking it.

The women apart from direct rescue actions also re-educate the menfolk on the diagnostic approach and adequate response to the eco-crisis. The men under the leadership of Chief Osere think the cause is supernatural and therefore needs as magical solution. Osere vows “Whoever tried this must pay for it. I will send for a medicine man. That devil must embrace thunder” (22). In line with Chief Osere’s thinking Arera corroborates that “And I must add that the gods are angry... Our ancestors are now homeless and have no food to eat” (22). Consequently, if many things have gone wrong as the women remind the Chief, it is because women have never been given the attention, they deserve in Ekon land. As a reminder they say: “Chief, each time we table our problems before you, you do not take us seriously” (22). They therefore draw the Chief’s attention to the fact that the genesis of the ecological destruction and other accompanying problems initially is not the result of any bewitchment or any supernatural force. It is the consequence of uncontrolled timber exploitation and destruction of their forest, including the age old sacred ancestral forest by the timber men. As critical and objective observers, the women force the Ekonians to retrospect by telling their Chief and the men that “... since the timber men left our land, we have recorded one problem after another. What can this mean”? (22). Furthermore, they enumerate a series of other neglected potential life-threatening problems emanating from the eco-destruction. These include the invasion of farms by animals, streams drying up before the middle of the dry season, and water scarcity. In conclusion they think it is time to solve the problems at this manageable stage before the situation assumes an alarming proportion as they take lead.

In *Gaining the Game*, game is near extinction due to excessive hunting, there is indiscriminate use, dumping or burning of “... polythene papers or what you commonly call waterproof papers and other plastics and rubber materials for they contain substances that deplete the ozone layer and therefore allow the sun’s ultra violet rays to hit us and the earth directly, leading to some illnesses like skin cancer and global warming” (sic 71). In the face of

these dangers, the women begin by symbolically dressing “...in wrappers of green vegetation design” (70), as a sensitization drive as the stage directions state. They also dance in the Palace court yard in the presence of all and sundry, an abnormal occurrence in a chauvinistic setup. In order to further drum home the various methods aimed at mitigating the prevailing situation and ensuring sustainability, they use a song as the fastest means of communication. This song is internally segmented into two with each section focussing on a distinct eco-concern. The initial part focuses on the attitudes to adopt with regards to the fauna and the latter part raises issues that concerns the flora. On the Faunal protection policies the song stipulates what should be put into practice by the community. As they say:

Elephant, I go leave am, cutting-grass I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Gorilla, I go leave am, rat mole I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Monkey I go leave am, fish for fish pond I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Tiger I go leave am, snail for forest I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Lion I go leave am, Porcupine I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Parrot I go leave am, but bush fowl, I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
Protected species, I go leave am, but any other one I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am  
But any other one I go catch am,  
Catch am catch am chop, I go catch am (p. 79-80).

In order to protect the ozone layer the women in their song lay down a series of attitudes and actions to be adopted towards the flora.

Orchard I go plant am, polythene paper I no go burn am  
For seka ozone layer, he di destroy  
Fruit trees, I go plant am, but forest timber I no touch am  
Except government, give me he Paper  
Eru for forest, I go harvest, with big big sense,  
We do am  
So that tomorrow, we no go lack am (80).

The women of Ala`zineh in the above song express new eco-sensibilities in their society using Pidgin English, the language of the common man to reach a wider audience. It becomes a new integrative discourse that prescribes sustainable exploitation of the available resources and the protection of some species in order to maintain a balanced ecosystem. More so,

the womenfolk aware of the importance of the ozone layer; suggest practical ways to fight its depletion through productive afforestation and, at the same vein attack negative consumerism. In both texts, they become advocates that seek to transform their society from despoilers to guardians of the flora and fauna. The mutation they undergo in Berg's (2010: 439) opinion makes them to "... become enlightened stewards rather than rapacious pillagers of the planet".

The destruction in the context of the corpus becomes more of a source of Anderson (2010: 37) refers to as "...self-reflection and (functions) as unexpected emblems of spiritual and ecological renewal". The women trigger the adoption of new eco-laws. From the vestiges of the destruction these laws strictly focus on sustainable use, deterring punishment for defaulters and more importantly instant re-afforestation. The Ala`zineh community adopt laws that bind indigenes and the foreign companies. Consequently:

By that law, all logging companies shall henceforth fell only authorized species of timber and shall, as a matter of obligation, plant TEN new trees for each timber they fell; if they fail to do so, their license will be withdrawn by government. So the forest shall not only be exploited but also be protected for you all to benefit now and tomorrow. (73)

From the above excerpt emerges a genuine ecological concern, a necessity not only to effectively maintain the equilibrium between deforestation and reforestation, but to tilt the balance more to reforestation. This re-naturalization process has both immediate and long term benefits for the people especially the vulnerable women and the ecosystem itself. As the European Commission Report (2009:1) sums up, "By conserving nature and restoring ecosystems we reduce vulnerability and increase resilience. Nature conservation and restoration is a major, cost-efficient ally in our fight against climate change".

## Conclusion

This work has argued that ecological and social regeneration could be attained when the women are allowed to take charge of it. An examination of the process of eco-destruction revealed that its multifaceted meaning and impact has almost been narrowed down to hopelessness. Out of the ecological damage ranging from deforestation, threat of species extinction, pollution and its corresponding far reaching consequences on both nature and women, emerges the women as agents of hope. This hope hinges on diverse issues which range from an increase eco-consciousness, knowledge of an awareness of the impact of other devastating practices, changes in ecological laws, to power dynamics with regards to nature and in the social structure. The women out of experience as carers and a more nature-dependent group of people, revolutionize their respective societies in order to mitigate the impact of eco-destruction especially on themselves as well the entire society. By so doing they ensure a certain future with minimal eco-problems thus revealing an optimistic approach eco-destruction. These women also come into spaces where initially, they could not access thus indicating a paradigm shift in terms of control of natural resources and policies. New



policies and attitude are adopted by their respective societies thanks to the influential role of the women. Rulers with unquestionable authority are pushed to adopt new eco-laws and to always adopt a problem-solution approach that reflects the reality on the ground.

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