

African Literature, Mother Earth and Religion

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This book is dedicated to Sr Dr Rosemary Edet, founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Designer of the logo of the association. Your theological creativity lives on!

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Preface: going back to the first sentence of our childhood ... once upon a time

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The mission of a creative writer

Fiction has never been entertainment for me. It has been the work I have done most of my adult life. I believe that one of the principal ways, in which we acquire, hold and digest information, is via narrative. So, I hope you will understand when the remarks I make, begin with what I believe to be the first sentence of our childhood, that we all remember, the phrase, once upon a time (Morrison 1993a, <https://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/?id=1502>).

With the above, off-the-cuff remarks, Toni Morrison prefaced her scintillating acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature on the 7th of December 1993, in Oslo. In the official text of the speech itself, the words in the quote above, were excluded ostensibly because they were considered a non-essential part of the official lecture (Morrison 1993a). It is only in the audio version of the speech that these words are to be found.

For me, the opening remarks of Morrison (1993a) constitute a vital key to understanding both her excellent lecture and the seriousness with which she approached her work as a creative artist. With her opening remarks Morrison, aptly and quickly, disabused any members of her audience who might have laboured under the impression that as a creative writer, her primary job was merely to entertain. In a few words, she outlined the mission of a creative writer and a weaver of narrative. It is a most solemn mission, namely, that of creating knowledge, enabling the acquisition of knowledge, promoting the retention of knowledge and facilitating the digestion of knowledge.

What Morrison (1993b) means is that while entertainment, in the broadest sense of the word, will almost certainly occur, it too, is only a means towards these greater ends. There is yet another assumption here, namely that creative narrative necessarily has knowledge to impart. There is no such thing as sheer jest or innocence in fiction or poetry Brueggemann 1989. Solemnity, intentionality and earnestness are not the sole domain of non-fiction, they are

central to fiction, poetry and other forms of creative writing. Indeed, it is conceivable that essentially both creative and non-fiction texts have similar if not the same aims. The difference is in the mode of delivery.

Invariably, the best creative writing tends to feel like non-fiction and the best non-fiction also feels like fiction. The two are not opposites, they are siblings. Predictably, there is, sometimes, a fair amount of sibling rivalry between them.

Mda (2017) reminds us of the story of Adams (2006), a journalist who chose to become a novelist. She did this because she reckoned that “it was only with fiction that she could address the truth behind the facts”. Mda proceeds to compare and contrast the journalistic approach to the creative approach thus:

Journalism answers the simple question: what happened? It is the same question that is answered by most forms of non-fiction, including history. What happened? Of course, there are attendant questions, such as how and why it happened, but the key story lies in the event. Fiction, on the other hand, goes much further, and answers the question: what was it really like to be in what happened? (Mda 2017, <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/06/25/the-jrb-daily-fiction-is-essential-in-a-corrupt-society-read-zakes-mdas-sunday-times-literary-awards-keynote-address/>).

In a slight moderation of Mda’s view, I would suggest that, strictly speaking, both genres have the capability to pose the same questions, but the route towards the answer will necessarily be different. A solid and meticulous theologian or historian may be able both to sharply pose the question “what was it really like to be in what happened?” and to mount as magnificent a response as any talented creative writer. When the poet and the anthropologist take their trade seriously, both can create knowledge, facilitate its acquisition, enable digestion and awaken the senses.

Nevertheless, the peculiar strategies and tactics of the different genres have to be respected and to be taken seriously. Considering the place of politics in poetry and vice versa, Okri (2018) argues that,

Poetry needs no other power for it to be. It needs no other stage to exist except the ear and the eye, the listening heart. Politics is the manipulation of power in the structures of the world. Its territory is the world ... [but poetry] is a protest of the soul against the structures and injustices of the world (Okri 2018).

An extraordinary book for an extraordinary moment

By mid-April 2020, the whole world was virtually under lockdown, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, the number of infections continued to rise. And so did the deaths. The last time the world was a similar predicament, was one hundred and two years ago, during the 1918 influenza epidemic. The latter was a ferociously quick epidemic that killed more than 50 million people in the world, within a year (Spinney 2017). COVID-19 is no less deadly, and we have neither cure nor vaccine for it, but its *modus operandi* seems different. It is too early to tell, but in comparison to influenza, COVID-19 seems to work through society like slow poison. Indications are that it will stick around much longer than influenza and other more recent epidemics. Certainly, the socio-economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual impact of COVID-19 will last much longer than its actual duration.

While the devastating impact on human life is most obvious and even more scary, the immediate effect of COVID-19 on the environment is rather curious. As I write this preface, the skies are empty of planes, the forests have taken leave of human beings, the beaches are deserted, and so are the seas, public parks and gardens. For now, the fauna and the flora are free of humans. It is an extraordinary moment in recent human history - and in the history of the earth, since the first industrial revolution. Could this be the first sabbatical the earth has taken in a thousand years?

This extraordinary moment requires us to rethink not only the rites and rituals we use between human beings, but also our relationship both with the environment and fellow creatures. It will be a surprise, if not a pity, were humanity to return to business as usual, at the end of the COVID-19 crisis. To do so would be to be both deaf to history and blind to the reality of our current situation (Maluleke 2020a). COVID-19 has brought terror, economic devastation, an unprecedented cultural meltdown and death. We have not even begun to fathom the spiritual, and the psychological crisis that is setting in all over the world (Maluleke 2020b).

Inadvertently, COVID-19 has pressed the reset button on our relationships as human beings, on our relationships with fellow creatures, our relationship with our own bodies, as well as our relationship with the environment. All the dreams of limitless economic growth are up in smoke. The orgy of endless consumption and the amassing of wealth by a tiny minority in the face of a poor and hungry majority, has been temporarily interrupted. And yet we know for sure that if this moment is an inconvenience for the rich, it is much harder for the poor.

With many companies that are able to, opting to allow their staff to work from home, the world of work is being fundamentally redefined, perhaps irrevocably.

Will we see an intensification of automated and online modes of work and play? For the first time in a century, human beings are being requested to redefine their gestures and rituals of solidarity, acceptance, love and familiarity. Is this the end of the handshake, the hug and high five? We wonder.

The world leaders having largely ignored the environmental revolution led by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg (Thunberg 2019), will they proceed to wilfully miss the COVID-19 'opportunity' to reinvent the relations of humanity with the environment? At the end of the pandemic shall we go back to shopping till we drop? Shall we go back to the heavily polluted world of inequality and violence? Or shall we develop new models of economy – economic models in which both public health and the environment will become essential components?

Focussed as it is on the global environmental crisis, this volume could not have been more timely. Thematically, the volume rests on five legs, namely: a) the environmental crisis, b) the focus on Africa and people of African descent, c) the utilisation of the creative as opposed to the usual non-fiction approach, d) the role of religion in the search for solutions to the environmental crisis as well as e) the usage of gender as an analytical category. With reference to the latter, it is important to note that three of the four sections have a strong gender emphasis and the vast majority, if not all the contributors, are African women.

This volume presents a rare compilation of African creative artists' reflections on the intersections between literature, religion and gender. In this sense, this book is a gift from the sisters, daughters and children of Wangari Muta Maathai, the environmental activist, tree planter and the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her environmental activism. To conclude her Nobel Peace acceptance speech, delivered in Oslo, 10 December 2004, Maathai reminisces about her childhood experiences, when she,

...would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother. I would drink water straight from the stream. Playing among the arrowroot leaves I tried in vain to pick up the strands of frogs' eggs, believing they were beads. But every time I put my little fingers under them they would break. Later, I saw thousands of tadpoles: black, energetic and wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth. This is the world I inherited from my parents. Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost. The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder (Maathai 2004, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/26050-wangari-maathai-nobel-lecture-2004/>)

In part, this book is a response to the challenge laid out by Wangari Maathai. It contains a series of reflections on what is required of us, if we are going to be able to “restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.” It is a book that suggests, from the point of view of narrative, how we may avoid what Thunberg (2019) refers to as “the beginning of mass extinction” while all the world leaders “can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.”

Contributors to this book have chosen the ‘languages’ of creative arts namely, poetry, folklore and narrative in order to mount a gendered discourse that challenges all of us, but also to appeal to other ways of knowing, hearing, feeling and seeing. The volume intends to take us beyond propositional positivism and sheer logical argumentation, which tend to be aimed at the head and not the heart. As Brueggeman has noted:

To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be *poets that speak against a prose world*. The terms of that phrase are readily misunderstood. By prose I refer to a world that is organised in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos (Brueggemann 1989).

The first section deals with the intersection between narrative and womanhood, womanhood and folklore, as well as womanhood and folktales – all these in the pursuit of environmental integrity. In the second section, the focus turns to motherhood – the motherhood of earth, nature and woman. Village, country and water are the main themes of the third section. In the final section of the book, the writers tackle the environmental crisis in light of contemporary urban reality, motherhood in contemporary society as well as the intersection between the motherhood, the motherhood of the land of Africa and the motherhood of women.

Conclusion: once upon a time

To conclude, we return to the narrative of Toni Morrison. On occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, on the 7th of December 1993, she begun her acceptance speech by saying:

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise. ... Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement. One day the woman is visited by some

young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead" (Morrison 1993a, <https://www.nobelprize.org/media-player/?id=1502>).

This is the setting which Toni Morrison establishes for her unforgettable acceptance speech. One day, that speech must be set to music, if only for its rhythmic structure, the depth of its wisdom and the way it begins from a diminuendo, rising slowly through waves of increasing crescendos, until it thunders.

For her purposes, Morrison (1993) reckons the bird in the hands of the old woman's young visitors signified language, and that she was the embodiment of a writer, worried about the prospects of language. She realises that language is vulnerable and could be dying already. Toni Morrison is quick to point out that dead language is not merely language that is no longer spoken, but it is 'unyielding language', content in its own paralysis; 'statist language' censored language that specialises in censoring; official language that is hollow existing only to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege; looted language without nuance; oppressive language that is not merely a pretext for violence but violence itself; the calcified language of the academy; the commodity-driven language of science; the malign language of law without ethics; 'language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism'. It is a breath-taking and colourful list of dead language types - as only Toni Morrison could help us imagine.

Like a good musical piece, the Toni Morrison speech ends with a resolution and a coda. But first, there was a war of words and a battle of wills, between the youngsters and the old woman. She accuses them of youthful arrogance and they accuse her of abdication and indifference to their plight. But in the end, the old woman is able to say to the youngsters: "I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together."

It is tempting to continue tracking the soaring intellect of Morrison (1993a, 1993b) in this deceptively simple speech, based on an ancient and well known, once upon a time story. Indeed, the very fact that the writers of this book have taken care and have been deliberate in seeking an appropriate language for a discussion of one of the most important issues in the world today, namely, the

environmental crisis, shows their awareness of the power of language as well as the medium in which is communicated.

The question we have to face today, is what is the bird that is in the hands of the youngsters confronting the old woman today? It is not a bird that is in the hands of contemporary youngsters. They clasp in their hands, the dreams of Wangari Muta Maathai. The dreams of a continent and a world with a fully restored biodiversity ecosystem. The question is whether those dreams of Wangari Maathai are alive or dead. The truth is; we have allowed some of the dreams of Wangari Maathai to die. And who is the old woman? The old woman is you and I – especially those among us, who care about the environment. But alas, unlike Morrison's old woman; our old woman appears to be aloof and unperturbed even in the face of the dying and tattered environment, the dead and hollowed rivers, the lifeless and denuded forest, the polluted skies and the poisoned seas. Unmoved by the cry of the dying earth and silent in the face of what Thunberg (2019) calls “the beginning of a mass extinction.” This edited book volume is a wake-up call and a call to action. The call itself is not new, but in this book, it is being made in a different octave and in the language of the creative writer, the storyteller and the poet.

Accordingly, I conclude the essay by making reference to the words of the two keynote speakers: 24-year-old Vanessa Nakate, a climate activist from Uganda, and Costa Rican diplomat, Christiana Figueres (Nakate 2020).

Suggesting that 2020 is a year in which several crises converge, Figueres (2020) opened her lecture with this invitation to her audience to imagine the following scenario:

I invite you in your mind's eye, to picture a beach, where there are adults, not children, adults, sitting on the beach, with their backs to the ocean, and building sand castles. And unbeknown to them, there is a wave that is coming towards the beach, and that wave is entitled 'the health crisis'. Behind that wave, there is a greater wave that is coming towards the beach. And that wave is entitled 'the economic crisis'. Behind that one, there is a larger wave, entitled 'the biodiversity crisis'. And behind the biodiversity crisis, there is a wave that is ten times higher, ten times stronger than all of the first waves, and that is entitled, 'the climate change crisis'. Now, what is sadly unseen by everyone is not just that the adults have their backs turn against these crises coming at them, but that underneath all those waves, there is an undercurrent that is part and parcel of all of those waves ... and that underlying current is inequality (Figueres 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaqkWmNgFAO>).

If the words of Figueres appealed to the imagination, young Nakate drew out the practical implications and manifestation of climate change in Africa:

What does climate change mean for Africa? It means food crisis. It means water crisis. Half of Nigeria has no access to water and according to OXFAM twelve million people in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are in dire need of food. But with the escalating climate disasters, the number is going to increase, with many people struggling to eat. Remember that for every one percent increase in drought, there is a 2.4% decrease in Agriculture output, and a family will go hungry and a child will sleep hungry. None deserve this. No child deserves to live this way. Congo rain forest, which is the largest rain forest in Africa, faces massive deforestation and yet over 80 million people depend on its existence. Over ten thousand animals call this place home and it has over ten thousand species of plants. This forest is the only home for the forest giraffe also known as the okapi. ... We are demanding for the protection of the lungs of Africa (Nakate 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaqkWmNgFA0>).

In a similar fashion, this volume employs fiction, lament and poetic language, in order to touch heads, hearts and souls.

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Introduction: creative art, gender and religion as mitigatory agents to the global environmental crisis

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Introduction

A significant number of researches have been done on gender, feminism, climate change, conflict and food security, and the place of religion in contemporary society. This book, while not disregarding such discourse, focuses on the intersection of gender and the construction of the Earth in various traditions of a literary and cultural texts in the African context. It is premised on an ecofeminist idea that there is a fundamental relationship between women and the environment. Literature can be defined as the creative or artistic representation in words which can either be oral or written. This encompasses all the texts analysed in this volume which are folklore, poetry, novels, songs and paintings. Such works as imitations of real life provide case studies of real lived experiences. The book aims at providing critical insights to the challenges of environmental management in the age of the Anthropocene. In the global south, the book project is premised on the need to interrogate diverse religious, cultural and philosophical ideas that impact human interaction with the Earth and where there is a need to re-imagine and re-interpret these ideas. This is in keeping with Shohat and Stam's (2012, p. 21) observation that:

There was a phase at the very beginning in which everything that was seen as anti-colonial was all binaries, essentialism. It is more complicated. Yes, some were, some were not. The other element, that we were addressing today by talking about the Red Atlantic, is this notion that anything you go back to search in the past is kind of fetishistic

nostalgia, or going back to origins and thus naively essentialist. So, we were questioning the unproblematic celebration of hybridity and dismissal of any search into the precolonial past as a naive search into the prelapsarian origin.

The current book project demystifies such monolithic myths, promotes plurality of ideas and brings to the fore the importance of Mother Earth and creative works of art, literature and folklore as agents mitigating the challenges that the world faces today, including the global environmental crisis.

This book comprises articles that analyse the intersection between the environment, gender and religious thought in African literature and folklore. In light of the global environmental crisis, characterised by global warming and climate change, the book explores how Earth, gender and religious thought present both challenges and possible solutions in African creative art. Consequently, the book examines the construction of gender and Earth in religious and cultural traditions, and how it impacts the lives of women and men in their relationship with the earthly spaces they inhabit. The articles also re-interpret these religio-cultural texts for the empowerment of both men and women, their communities and the environment. Various theoretical frameworks are employed which include African womanism, ecofeminism and postcolonialism precisely for their rejection of straightjacketed binaries of colonial discourse. This provides a novel reading of ancient creative works of art, such as folktales, as well as modern texts whose existing criticism has focused on other elements other than the relationship of women and the land or environment. All creative works of art are developed from lived experiences and mirror society. Consequently, gleanings from the texts project solutions for contemporary society and reveal religious and cultural values that inform human interaction with the environment.

The interface of religion, gender and the environment

The current global environmental crisis is a threat to life on Earth. Almost all disciplines have therefore attempted to interrogate assumptions and practices that have led to this crisis. This book project by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is a contribution to that trajectory analysing theological and literary texts. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines religion as, “The belief in a god, and organised system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods” (www.merriam-webster.com). Seminal to this volume is a critique of the representation of various religious views in terms of how they impact the environment. Cottlieb (2004) focuses on how religious diversity can save Earth and its biodiversity. Religions “provide norms of conduct for the familiar interpersonal settings of family, community, and the

world. Religious moral teachings presuppose a spiritual foundation and are meant to root our everyday behaviour in spiritual truth about who we really are” (Cottlieb 2004, p. 8). Religion is, therefore, closely related to identity and cultural practices and is consequently inextricably intertwined in environmental matters. Cottlieb lists eight areas of acute concern in environmental degradation: global climate/atmospheric change; toxic wastes; loss of land, loss of species; loss of wilderness, devastation of indigenous peoples, human patterns and quantities of consumption as well as, genetic engineering. Some theological scholars have linked the source of Earth’s troubles with the misinterpretation of the Biblical scripture on dominion as an injunction to manipulate the Earth for the benefit of humankind. As Mcfague underlines:

The environmental crisis is a theological problem, a problem coming from the views of God and ourselves that encourages or permits our destructive, unjust actions. For example, if I see myself (deep down) as superior to other animals and life forms—a privileged individual...---- then of course I will act in ways that support my continuation in this position. So we are suggesting that who God is and who we are must be central questions if we hope to change our actions in the direction of just, sustainable planetary living (Mcfague 2008, p. 33).

This therefore, implies that humans should not assume that they are superior in the cosmos and end up destroying the environment. Instead, they should coexist with all the creatures, flora and fauna; and in the process conserve and manage the environment efficiently. In agreement with this view are postcolonial literary critics (Mukherjee 2010; Wenzel 2019) that strongly link the environmental crisis with the relationship between the Global North and the Global South that is skewed in favour of the north but destructive to the environment and all inhabitants (human, flora and fauna).

The pinnacle of this book project is the analysis of the representation of the religio-gender-environmental interface in texts that reflect the connection between nature and the biology of the woman. This connection is at times thought to be complementary. However, complementarity does not necessarily imply equality and equity. The connection of gender and nature is one that has often seen the sanctioning of the oppression of both. This oppressive side needs to be fully acknowledged and closely interrogated before celebrating the connection of the two in case oppressive perspectives are endorsed. Oduyoye (2008, p. 91) notes that many African cultures have “built-in beliefs, practices, and languages that are oppressive to women” and portray women to be naturally silent and self-sacrificing for the good of the community. Magosvongwe (2013, p. 50) notes that traditionally land is connected with the seasons and therefore comparable with the woman’s biological cycle. Women are thus regarded as part

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