

Feminist Ecology, Despoliation and Resilience in Environmental Education

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Abstract

The simple word “environment” has become synonymous with “human habitat” which is in turn an understatement because this habitat does not belong to humans alone, it is shared with animal and plant life whose diversity is comparable to that of human life. The characteristic diversity of the species of the human habitat or planet Earth came under threat from the activities that were undertaken by humans on behalf of development. Historical phases of human development are referred to as industrial revolutions which have so far counted up to four, according to scholars. These phases of development in human history coincide with periods of the greatest damage to the environment resulting in a systematic disappearance of the species from the human habitat the source of the natural resources that have driven the industrial revolutions and is at the same time the dustbin into which waste products from the associated industrial and household activities are thrown. This essay examines feminist ecology, despoliation and resilience in environmental education.

Keywords: Feminist ecology; despoliation; environmental education.

Introduction

The diverse perspectives in environmental discourse remain without abatement. Environmental education, as a field of knowledge, is continuously evolving to address the various emerging environmental issues, especially, to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is probably as it should be because there is increasing tendency to extend an examination of the purpose, place and practice of environmental education from science to nature study, feminism, women studies, and other fields of knowledge. Environmental education is a subject that is known for complexity.

Some of the issues raised in it can be examined from different perspectives. As Johnson and Mappin (2005:7) put it, “The controversy within education and the public debates reflect the conflicting perspectives and priorities held by educators, society, and policymakers on what schools should teach, for what ends, and for what reasons”. The conceptual frameworks for tackling some of these issues also vary according to whether the tool is formal or informal, whether the setting is Africa or elsewhere, and whether the subject or agency is a woman or a man, a child or an adult, is educated or uneducated, etc. It is a variable study of angles of vision.

Feminist Ecology

Feminism has done much to correct a lot of misconceptions about women which have come from ignorance and prejudice and gathered momentum over the years. Women were thought ignorant about many things including about the human habit. History and experience show that men more than women have been more ignorant about many things including about the sustainability of the human and animal habitat, Earth. Men more than women have been responsible for overharvesting the natural resources and overexploiting women and the consequences are global (Kemp and Squires 1997). But this paper is not about passing the buck, it is about taking a critical glance at the role of women in the ecology of some of the issues connected with environmental sustainability.

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For this purpose, the term “awareness” features in the discussion as a formal and informal emotional, instinctual and cognitive acquaintanceship with past, present and prospective geophysical conditions of the locale of the home(s) and venue of household practices. Women are the crucial, often ignored change agents of the human, animal, and plant habitat and are the preoccupation of feminist ecology. By household practices is meant activities which are carried out routinely in homes both indoor and outdoor. Despoliation denotes the impact of activities by men and women on the habitat. Resilience is the capacity by the living things or the inhabitants of the planet to bounce back under stress. Environmental sustainability is shown in the study as closely connected to resilience, it makes reference to prospects for the environment in terms of both its ability to sustain some of the gains of identified household and other practices and the capacity to aggravate or redeem some of the concerns of conservationists about the cumulative damage to the environment.

Environmental studies have concentrated on the impact of the so-called industrial revolutions on the environment since the 1700s up to now (Elliot 2014 and Schwab 2016) and drawn attention to how new knowledge and new skills have been enlisted by humans to unleash more devastating exploitation of the planet with negative consequences on the environment. The industrial revolutions may have been accompanied by many material comforts, yet increasingly studies show that the industrial revolutions are borrowing from the future to fund today’s material comforts. In many developing countries, not much is done by administrations about the negative impacts on the environment of human activities with the aim of correcting them. The official blind eye to the environment is more out of expediency than out of ignorance. The assumption in some circles that information about the environment is commonplace because of the phenomenal capacity to circulate information in an ICT age may be mistaken.

Women constitute an important part of humanity on points of demography and several unquantifiable qualities as is now acknowledged largely thanks to feminist discourse and research in cultural anthropology, religion, history, sociology, literature, and other disciplines. It started out in the nineteenth century and picked up steam in the twentieth century, a period that gave the woman the vote in Britain and Germany, officially installed the democratic apparatus in Nigeria in 1960, Botswana in 1966, and enfranchised the (black) woman (and man) in South Africa in 1994. Women have played the role of breadwinner in many parts of the world for centuries although largely unacknowledged and unappreciated until recent times.

Some of the activities of women (and men) that endanger the habitat are undertaken out of ignorance. It follows that awareness is important in the attempt to put an impending environmental crisis under control. It is also correct to assert that not much can be accomplished in the pursuit of environmental sustainability without the input of women. Manicom and Walters affirm that “The valorization of women’s knowledge, starting from and building upon what women already know in their everyday lives, is a central tenet of Feminist Popular Education” (Walters 1996:69). The assumption is correct that “women already know”.

In biblical terms creation was incomplete with only the man present initially in the Garden of Eden; by divine assessment, creation only qualified as complete and beautiful with the arrival of woman on the scene: “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (Genesis 2:18). It is therefore a wonder that man should take it upon himself to relegate for centuries the status of what was comparable to him from the beginning of time without grasping the contradiction.

For a long time until recently the woman was in general kept under masculine subjugation based on a misinterpretation of scripture “he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16) and some man-

made gender suppositions and self-centred agendas which feminist discourse is in the process of dismantling and showing to be arbitrary, biased, unfair and unwarranted in many respects at different levels of human experience (Kemp and Squires 2005). For example, societal masculine prejudices prevented my mother from receiving formal education despite her acuity of mind, while my father was in his own case well educated –and there are many women like my mother in Osun State who despite their not being formally trained can be relied on to display respectable knowledge of the environment in which they live and is worthy of investigation.

Environmental Despoliation

The over-harvesting of natural resources has resulted in food insecurity, despite increased use of improved mechanization in agricultural practices in many parts of the world. Climate change has reduced the availability of potable water in many parts of the world. The volume of water has increased in the oceans and seas through a melt-down of snow and icebergs in some parts of the world. It has led to a general depletion of sea and land resources (Gonzalez de Molina and Toledo 2014). In consequence, a rapidly growing population is viewed with alarm in several countries which have limited resources. In other parts with limited resources they continue to breed like rats mostly out of superstition and ignorance.

Nigeria is the most populous and ethnically diverse country in Africa. It is home to a modest presence of equatorial rain forests which have been heavily depleted through perennial lumbering activities by all comers in the wood-related industries. This encourage random commercial felling of trees for timber for export overseas and for raw materials for the domestic furniture and building industries which are located in the major cities and towns of Nigeria such as Lagos, Ibadan, Osogbo, Warri, Sapele, Benin City, Onitsha, Asaba, Enugu, Aba, Port Harcourt, Kaduna, Kano, and Abuja. Hinterland from the coastline, the assault on trees is not only for commercial purposes but also to give way to the chaotic building and road construction projects which take place year in year out without a thought to a pragmatic replacement of the trees so felled. Lagos, one time capital city of Nigeria, is an example of sprawling urbanization that is unrelieved by natural green vegetation which was present there before Nigeria's political independence in 1960.

The environment is regularly abused out of ignorance. A part of remembered oral history of my home village Okuku in Osun State in Nigeria is of environmental interest and instructive. 1970s Okuku the headquarters of the Odo-Otin Local Government had odan trees (a tree that is well-known for its lush green leaves which provided shelter for pedestrians and a playground cover for children on a sunny day). The trees lined the towns tarmac roads. A male councillor (a politically appointed local government area administrator) woke up one day and ordered that all the trees to be cut down because the trees made the town look backward and old-fashioned, that in his opinion the towns and villages around were bare of trees and seemed as a result to be more modern-looking. It was a ghastly environmental error of judgment from which the town has not recovered.

Apart from the fact that the environment can suffer damage on a whim in the country, there is also the perennial fuel-related threat to the environment. While crude oil-spillage and natural gas flaring through fossil fuel exploration and extraction by multi-national companies destroys vegetation in the riverine parts of south-south and south-east Nigeria (the country's crude oil and natural gas deposits are mostly offshore), the widespread practice nationally of using trees as "firewood" to make fire for domestic purposes encourages a random destruction of vegetation. It also endangers the environment in some other ways from through released smoke, carbon-dioxide, wood ash, etc. which end up as environment as waste.

The ecology of Osun State has an interesting history. It spreads over a terrain made up of the equatorial rain forest belt, savannah and derived savannah vegetation belt in the south-west of Nigeria. The state has a topography that is suitable for agriculture, such as crop and livestock farming, fishery, poultry. It used to be known for the production of such cash crops as cocoa, palm-kernels (for mostly overseas export markets), kola-nuts (whose main market is northern Nigeria and to a lesser extent eastern Nigeria). Its forests were a source for the hardwood market locally and overseas export – and up to the late 1980s saw-mills, as they were described, for processing felled forest trees were rife in the State: a regular reminder to the observant person then of how severe the attack was on the equatorial rain forest. The relentless incursion on the forest depleted the forest reserves so rapidly that trees for the timber saw-mills began to diminish to a point that a lot of them started to fail and close down for lack of business by the 1990s. Today, the rain forest edges have receded so much that the predator saw-mills have virtually disappeared because of their economic unviability – a sad story of the rapacity of capitalism on a rain forest belt that has virtually disappeared.

Osun State is also known for smoked game meat prepared from the carcasses of a wide variety of wild animals such as reptiles (including snakes) and rodents which are sold mostly by women hawkers to travellers at the roadsides of major highways and to proprietors mostly of food canteens (run by mostly women) patronised mostly by workers, artisans and labourers who are usually men. Both the fuel (wood) and the raw materials for the barbecued delicacy are predictably products of the natural forest and by-products of the lumbering activities that have virtually eaten up the natural forest reserves.

Apart from deforestation, some other major environmental problems in Osun State include soil erosion, water pollution, loss of biodiversity and flooding (Nigerian Environmental Study Team 1991). Irregular rain patterns and excessive heat have become prevalent and there is also the sticky issue of improper or negligent disposal of household and other types of waste. The bad environmental situation is also closely tied to the problems of bush burning and air pollution (Zhang and Wang 2010).

It is conceded that the man and the woman both play crucial roles in the community. In Osun State as in the biblical Garden of Eden, the woman is an active agent of environmental engagement and change while the man might be somewhat passively involved except when there is some specific gain from the effort, some financial or commercial motivation. In their industrious zest and as individuals, women of Osun State can function effectively in many roles as a woman, wife, mother, and custodian of the environment and customs. The women hunt the bushes for firewood and, as proprietors of commercial food canteens, provide a ready market for the perishable carcasses of the game killed and brought home by the men from their hunting and lumbering expeditions in the forest – although the variety and quality of the game have diminished drastically in proportion to the disappearance of wildlife together with the disappearing forest reserve. The roadside hawkers' and food canteen's delicacy nowadays consists mainly of barbecued or smoked "grasscutter" (cane rat and large rodent) and the occasional antelope. Sometimes it is the women themselves who search the bushes for these rats because a lot of women are also involved in farming, which is a major occupation in Osun State.

The all-round usefulness of the palm tree is of environmental interest because it parallels the industry and resilience of the African woman. The palm tree is a straight tropical tree with a mass of long leaves at the top. It is a significant feature of the Osun State landscape. The usefulness of the palm tree is proverbial; every part of it is useful. The palm frond can be cut and used to cover

a hut as a roof. The long leaves can be trimmed and bunched together and be used as a broom. The tree trunk can be cut and sawn to size and be used as rafters to support a roof in a building. While the tree is still standing and alive, its sap yields palm wine that is a popular local alcoholic beverage (liked by men mostly) when it is fermented. Its fruit (yellowish and red) is processed to produce palm oil – which is processed by first boiling the fruit to soften the pericarp and then pounding it in a wooden mortar using human feet or pestles, an exertion invariably undertaken by women. The activity is followed by floating the mush in a cauldron to separate the oil from the kernels (hard-shelled nuts). The kernels then are manually cracked (by women and children) to extract the nuts from the shells for export and a few local industries that make candles, soaps, and pomades, etc. The waste products from the process come as pulp and shells which when dry are used as domestic fuel which is burnt for cooking and emits a considerable amount of smoke. The cortex of a dying palm tree yields edible macroscopic (insect) caterpillars (whitish in colour) which breed there and are nutritious when harvested and cooked with stew and vegetables.

Unfortunately, this wild, all-rounder cash crop, the palm tree, has suffered significant reverses in recent times similar to those that have befallen the equatorial rain forests of the huge and durable iroko, mahogany, teak, etc. felled for hardwood export and raw material for the local furniture industries in the bigger coastline cities and towns in the country. Nowadays you only see a lone palm tree here and there standing or swaying in the wind, its great height as a tree exposed to freak weather conditions that sometimes break the trunks in two or uproot them from their natural anchor of adventitious roots. The palm tree count is low in number now because it and other tree species are relentlessly bulldozed by humans to make space for modern structures built of concrete.

The roads I used to walk barefoot as a girl had palm trees and other green-leafed trees on stretches of land which flanked the roads leading to Odo-Otin, the town's main river that supplied us with water for domestic use. Today, the river is both silting up from flooding and buckling under piles of dumped refuse from nearby houses. It is now without the green vegetation, generally speaking, because it has been taken over by modern buildings whose fenced grounds are also cemented or terraced floors according in thinking that is similar to the capricious idea of modern development of the male councillor who ordered the felling of the environmentally useful odan tree, as earlier described. But the situation is not hopeless. A little dose of environmental education should help matters, and together with the capacity for resilience in the plant, animal and human kingdoms, there is a chance for environmental sustainability.

Resilience

The Chambers Dictionary defines resilience as “recoil; the quality of being resilient” and resilient as “recoiling, rebounding; able to recover from and position elastically; able to withstand shock, suffering, disappointment and so forth.” Micro and macro organisms under assault by humans must have some kind of innate mechanism for shock resistance and recovery. Critics of the ecosystem theory in ecological science state that natural populations are actually adaptable to changes in the environment (Des Jardins 2005). However, it must be conceded that once the capacity to adapt crosses an elastic limit, some of the species practically sink out of sight, into extinction. Therefore, environmental education for the sustainability of the human habitat becomes imperative. The human species has an extraordinary capacity for resilience which can be galvanized to the general weal, as documented in *The Community Resilience Manual* (2000). It states that “Communities, whether sophisticated or inexperienced in the application of community economic development, felt the community resilience process motivated and mobilized people and helped bring into focus priorities

for action” (*The Community Resilience Manual* 2000:2). The manual is also not, opposed to “the integration of ecological characteristics and indicators...and linking community health indicators to the process...” (*The Community Resilience Manual* 2000:3).

The document has a functional description of community as “A resilient community is one that takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to, and influence the course of social and economic change” (*The Community Resilience Manual* 2000:5). This definition means that the gap noted by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) as existing between awareness and the willingness by people to take environmentally sustainable action seems correctible through adopting a Community Economic Development (CED) model which is presented in the manual as a dynamic process. The manual also notes that “Current research supports the idea that resilience is not a fixed quality within communities. Rather, it is a quality that can be developed and strengthened over time. As resilience is strengthened, the capacity to intentionally mobilize its people and resources to respond to, and influence social and economic change is enhanced”(*The Community Resilience Manual* 2000:5)

A CED model adapted to the Osun State circumstance would yield an exciting result. This is because an aspect of its methodology – drawing up a community portrait – stipulates that “a portrait involves qualitative information about community perceptions, attitudes, and feelings as well as maps of organizational linkages and levels of collaboration...In other words, this process is specifically designed to view a community through the lens of resilience – or its ability to ‘take intentional action...to influence the course of social and economic change’” (*The Community Resilience Manual* 2000:21). The plant and animal worlds have an inbuilt capacity for recovery and survival according to some studies based on the ecological science model of ecosystem balance, though challenged, and the above narratives on women’s household and other practices in Osun State illustrate the capacity of women for resilience, as argued by feminist ecology.

Conclusion

It is clear that the environment is under an assault that is widely undertaken to enhance the quality of life in a materialist world. Ecology has shown that if the environment-based human activities continue without conscious thought and effort to salvage the situation, the environment may lose its ability to sustain future generations of humans and animals and plants.

Environmental education is a multi-perspective approach to the issues of awareness and attitude at formal and informal levels of teaching, learning, and research in attempts to salvage environmental sustainability before it is too late. This study shows that resilience is an important human attribute that is critical in the issue of sustainability in environmental education. It is adaptable and can be tapped to good advantage in dealing with environment issues that are specific to given localities.

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