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Women, Nature and the Soul: An Ecofeminist Reflection in Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala-Kanti*

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Abstract

This paper argues that women currently are more involved than men in the protection, sustenance and preservation of nature. This argument is backed by the view that to women, nature and the environment are matters of the soul. The paper taps literary evidence from *Venus of Khala-Kanti* to show the psucho-spiritual attachment that women have to the ecosystem, an attachment that allows them to commune with nature physically and metaphysically and to enhance their God-given roles as buoyant engines of today's society. The critical theory which informs the analysis herein is the Ecofeminist approach, which situates women as forebears of climate change mitigation and environmental protection and sustainability in a 21st century world, faced with very challenging environmental hazards.

Keywords: Women, Nature, Soul, Environment, Ecofeminism



Introduction

According to the biblical creation story in *The Holy Bible*, humans as superior beings created by God were given absolute authority over nature (fauna and flora):

God blessed them and said to them “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.” (Genesis 1: 28-29)

In *The Holy Bible*, then, humans have the mandate to coordinate the activities of nature (the environment) in all senses, except for natural phenomena over which they have little or no control. As such, humans have instituted a close, symbiotic, nature-friendly and very dynamic relationship with their environment. It could be inferred from God’s mandate to human beings to “increase and multiply” that He was referring to diverse ways of human production: knowledge, procreation, invention, discovery and much more.

Women have now grown far above the “weaker sex” label, which used to assign them to a state of psychosocial, spiritual, political and economic imprisonment. The African woman possesses potentials that allow her to play key roles in reproduction, production, community growth, economics, spirituality, politics (just to cite a few areas of their influence). In most African countries, women have traditionally been the breadbaskets of their society; they cultivate the soil and produce foodstuffs that feed families. Women are passionately involved in washing and cooking, fishing (aquaculture), bee farming, tree planting, gardening and petit trading or large commercial businesses. Today, women all over the world are now involved in politics, entrepreneurship, science and social activism.

This paper argues that today women are more involved than they used to be in the protection, sustenance and preservation of nature. This argument is dramatized in Angel Kingue’s



novel *Venus of Khala Kanti*, where women view nature and the environment as matters of the soul. The paper taps literary evidence from this novel to show the psucho-spiritual attachment which women have for the ecosystem, an attachment that allows them to commune with nature physically and metaphysically to enhance their God-given roles as buoyant engines of today's society. The critical theory which informs the analysis herein is the Ecofeminist approach, which situates women as forebears of climate change mitigation and environmental protection and sustainability in a 21st century world that is faced with very challenging environmental hazards.

Summarily, this paper elucidates its views from three central axes: ecofeminist canons which inform women's roles, the inseparable (symbiotic) relationship between women and nature in Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala Kanti*, and the strong bond of sorority exhibited between the women in *Venus of Khala Kanti* and their literary cosmos.

Ecofeminism: A Critical Review

Ecocriticism as a theory is a recent import in literary discourse. The word *ecocriticism* goes back to the American scholar, Cheryll Glotfelty, who coined it in 1989 to refer to a theory that looks at the way nature in general is presented in literary works. Before the advent the term *ecocriticism*, "the study of nature writing" was the concept en vogue. Also, prominent in ecocritical discourse are other names like Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell and Michael Branch. More recently, scholars and critics like William Slaymaker, Manthia Diawara and Rob Nixon, among others, have paid attention to the way ecocriticism and ecological literary writings have been viewed within African literary circles.

Ecocriticism looks at the relationship that exists between human beings and the environment and the manner in which this relationship is presented in literary works. It explores how human beings demonstrate their attitude toward the elements of nature and how they are affected by these elements.. It also stresses the fact that plants, animals and other elements of the ecosystem have and deserve their rightful place within the environment.



In ecocriticism, the greening of landscape is emphasized; thus, one notes the frequent occurrence of phrases that begin with the word "green"- green Sahel, green cities, green peace, green glasses, green revolution, shades of green, global green, etc.. By emphasizing "green", ecocriticism symbolically stresses originality, peace, birth and rejuvenation. The focus, therefore, is on the natural coexistence of man and nature, the preservation and proper management of the natural landscape.

Besides the above mentioned tenets, ecocriticism also handles issues of eco-activism and looks at the ways literary critics view issues of equity and justice and their place in environmental concerns. The Free Library in the introduction to its "Special Issue Ecocriticism Part 1" states:

According to Levin (1999:1097) ecocriticism is marked by a "tremendously ambitious, intellectual, ethical, political and even (sometimes) spiritual agenda." He [Levin] states that ecocritical dialogue often aims at transforming the human environment and ecological consciousness by guiding the historically egocentric Western imagination towards a newly emerging ecocentric paradigm. (34).

This observation supports the fact that ecocriticism not only focuses on the natural environment, but also takes into account other elements that make up that environment. Lawrence Coupe's definition further highlights this when he says ecocriticism is an approach to literature which "considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts and which theorizes about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction" (qtd. in Olaniyan and Quayson 705). In the same light, Richard Kerridge maintains:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear.... Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crises. (qtd. in Garrard 4)



In "Ecocriticism: the Intersection of Literature and the Environment", Heather Gorn maintains: "Through ecocriticism, scholars are able to integrate an environmental aspect into their work, thereby cultivating an awareness of environmental issues and asserting their significance" (12). This assertion situates ecocriticism in the context of larger human -related issues. Furthermore, ecocriticism looks at environmental issues in works of art via multidisciplinary perspectives; it considers the relationship between the natural environment and the socio-political and general environment within which humans operate. This praxis in ecocriticism ties in with the other sociological and functional critical perspectives which equally relate works of art to the other forces in society that inform them.

Slaymaker associates the meager response to the "Global Green" call with the cultural suspicions that continue to prevail between black and white cultural critics, where literary scholars like Manthia Diawara are concerned with the:

Domination of cultural markets by Eurocentrists who impose restrictions and propose fashions to the detriment of local artisans who wish to remain loyal to regional cultures and not switch allegiance to nation states artificially created by Europeans and their African puppets. (Olaniyan and Quayson 658)

It must be stressed here that multiple interpretations which limit/delimit ecocriticism tend only to obstruct the aggressive response to environmental challenges that ought to be embraced by all and sundry.

According to Sama Festus Ambe in "*Man and Environment in Modern African Poetry*" (M.A. Thesis),

Ecocriticism is not solely an academic exercise isolated from issues, but is married to, and determined by issues. Only from this perspective can environmental issues be handled more holistically with man at the centre. (28)



Also, an article “Addressing Environmental Problems in Africa” published by The Africa Society in March 2008 states:

The socioeconomic impact of environmental deterioration on Africa continues to pose a major problem to development, stability, and daily lifestyles. Africa has contributed less than any other region to greenhouse gas emissions that are widely held responsible for global warming. But the continent is also the most vulnerable to the consequences....Rapid urbanization and industrialization also create new environmental challenges.

(<http://www.africasummit.org/publications/Environment>)

Sama Festus Ambe in “*Man and Environment in Modern African Poetry*” opines that the problem was, is and will still be man if attitudinal change does not occur: “All these problems revolve around man and his behaviour in the environment, and their exacerbating nature calls for a rethinking of the strategies being implemented in handling environmental problems” (2).

Due to human beings’ domineering attitude over all the other species of the ecosystem, their actions in the environment—which are deliberate—have not only put the other species under stress, but have also put themselves in serious environmental crises today. Angele Kingue’s *Venus of Khala-Kanti* pictures human beings as two-fold; those (male truck drivers) who consciously destroy nature (the forest), and those (females- Assumta, Bella and Clarisse) who reclaim, rejuvenate, protect and sustain nature through their myriad actions.

In an article in *Agriculture and the Environment*, “International Cooperation to Protect Our Productive Environment”, Julia Morris opines:

In recent years, people around the world have come to acknowledge the importance of our natural environment and its sensitivity to the effects of humans’ actions. Holes in the ozone layer over the Antarctica, spreading deserts in Africa, acid rain in Eastern Europe, and deforestation in Brazil...

(204)



Ecocriticism is fundamental to our analyses in that it examines the way people relate and interact with their immediate natural environment in particular and in their social space in general, with the goal of mitigating (solving) environmental issues that have complicated human existence due, perhaps, to uncontrolled excesses. Most importantly, as unveiled in Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala-Kanti*, the above-mentioned literary texts lay serious emphasis on the inhumane pain perpetrated on the environment for selfish gains.

The Symbiotic Relationship between Women and Nature in Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala-Kanti*

In the introduction to her book, *If You Love this Planet: A Plan to Heal the Earth*, Helen Caldicott says:

The earth has a natural system of interacting homeostatic mechanisms similar to the human body's. If one system is diseased, like the ozone layer, the other systems develop abnormalities in function – the crops will die, the plankton will be damaged, and the eyes of all creatures on the planet will become diseased and vision impaired. (13)

The argument above stresses that the existence and survival of human beings are largely dependent on the conscious management of all elements that make up the ecosystem. It therefore implies the necessity for a symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature. This symbiosis is the thematic heart of Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala-Kanti*.

Dictionary.com, a free online dictionary, defines "symbiosis" as a biological term which describes an interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both. It can also be seen as a mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups. Symbiosis exists in a three-fold-dimension: mutualism (here, both partners benefit), commensalism (only one species benefits while the other is neither helped nor harmed) and parasitism (one organism_the parasite_ gains, while the other (the host) suffers. Symbiosis is synonymous to synergism, team effort or teaming.



Angel Kingue's masterpiece is a unique dramatization of these symbiotic paradigms. It is worth noting here that men in this text function as agents of parasitism and commensalism, while women (especially the trio- Bella, Assumta and Clarisse) are presented as flag bearers of mutualism. It can be argued then, that men and women collectively constitute one part of the symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature.

In her blurb on the novel, Jean-Marie Volet, effectively summarizes Kingue's thriller:

The heart of the story beats with the laughter and tears of three women. Having faced incredible hardship, they come together to build their lives anew, armed with the age-old spirit of human resilience, understanding and tenderness. Tapping into the very soil of Khala-Kanti, Bella, Assumta and Clarisse construct spaces, both internal and external, where they and others can rejuvenate their bodies, minds and spirits. They build the Good Hope Centre which embraces both the physical and the mystical landscape of the story. The centre fuels the restoration and growth of the village's inhabitants and offers a sanctuary for those who visit and those who stay. (Blurb)

Khala-Kanti, a junction village has suffered from "misaid funds" (3). The government has virtually abandoned the village, but due to its location, road construction (truck) drivers use this abandoned settlement en route to other construction and business destinations. Assumta convinces her father the Chief to cede a little portion of land for the construction of a warehouse which will advance development in Khala-Kanti in one way or another, Unfortunately, as Assumta puts it plainly to Khasia; "the terrible thing is that the drivers didn't build the storehouse and instead cut all of this small forest's beautiful trees – they razed everything!" (22).

As earlier postulated, men in the text (the truck drivers) are viewed as parasites and agents of commensalism who pretend not to have plans of harming nature in any way, but who end up benefitting from nature (the forest) and leaving her to suffer from the unfriendly act of deforestation. They clear all the trees in the forest to enrich themselves, leaving the villagers of



Khala-Kanti to suffer the effects of global warming through the direct contact with the ultraviolet rays of the sun, a contact which would have been prevented by the trees. As a result of their need for food, poaching is at its apex. We could therefore observe that due to men's greedy desire to make money for themselves, they have little or no respect for nature's wellbeing. It is worth stressing here that the Bekon forest, which is razed in Khala-Kanti, is powerfully symbolic. It is a microcosm of the macro forest in African countries, which have suffered from untold deforestation with little or no benefits enjoyed by the native forest owners.

In the same vein of parasitism, Boualo, the rising soccer star whose dreams are shattered by an injury that ends his career, vents his frustration on Bella, his beautiful, caring and understanding wife. Boualo chops off Bella's two arms, leaves her almost lifeless and disappears to an unknown destination. Boualo's behaviour is what is referred to as man's inhumanity to man. Naturally speaking, a man should love his wife as he does himself and protect her at all cost. Interestingly, Bella had assumed the manly role, undergoing untold pain for the couple's survival both in Tingui and back in the village. Yet, her reward is an armless body. Nature is terribly abused through Boualo's act. Thanks to nature's supernatural tendencies, Bella survives and wanders into Khala-Kanti. Her destiny resides in the homely bosom of nature.

Nature treats Bella fairly because of the good heart she possesses. Assumta welcomes her to the Good Hope Centre and treats her with love, tenderness and care. She offers Bella shelter and initiates her into the business on the basis of trust since they both seem to have suffered bad faith beyond measure. Assumta's treatment of Bella is complemented by Khasia, the intelligent teacher and most eligible bachelor of Khala-Kanti, who widely opens his loving arms and embraces Bella for sincere and pure love of her natural endowments. Khasia, unlike the parasitic truck drivers, is a symbol of mutualism in the text. After suffering untold hardship in his journalistic career, he resolves to retire back home to find peace and solace. This is what Khasia tells Bella one evening when they were lying in bed: "I have never seen anyone like you! When I was in Tingui, I would have so loved doing a profile of someone like you for my television newscast" (114).

Bella's response to Khasia is one of feigned seriousness: "One of nature's curiosities. That's right". Khasia, recognizing the self-derision that often characterized his lover's words responds immediately:

"No", I would most likely describe you as Zema, the goddess of harmony, the ancestor to the people of this region. She's the one who dried the diseases-bearing swamps and turned this corner of the forest into a livable place. She could only be seen at the mysterious and serene hour of dusk, in the light infused with colour that filtered through the leaves. Her body, whose contours were barely visible, drifted from house to house, leaving showers of shimmering music in her wake. (114)

Khasia's comparison of Bella to Zema, the goddess of harmony, is a clear indication of the central healing and productive role played by Assumta, Bella and Clarisse through their involvement with the Good Hope Centre, which becomes a sanctuary for the inhabitants and visitors of Khala-Kanti. It becomes apparent that Khasia and Assumta push Bella to embrace life and to restore her faith that nature still loves and can be loved in return. Hence, their mutualistic connection to nature is carefully enhanced.

In the same mutualistic vein, Assumta, Clarisse and Bella orchestrate a complete overhaul of Khala-Kanti's development through their investments in nature's heritage. All three young ladies withdraw from the city after experiencing hell in the form of torture, pain and suffering perpetrated by humans and as a consequence other natural phenomena. Nevertheless, the trio chooses not to lose hope but rather to find comfort and solace in nature- through their activities at the Good Hope Centre and other environs of Khala-Kanti.

Assumta takes responsibility for convincing the father to hand over a piece of land to the truck drivers who end up leaving it in a desolate state. She begins to make amends through the cleansing of that sacred part of Khala-Kanti. Assumta says: "I think we'll need to hold a lot of atonement ceremonies. I know I will need to part with a good amount of money in order to calm



them down” (23). This atonement is both physical and spiritual, for through it, the gods may be appeased and consequently, peace can return to the land.

To encapsulate the way of life of the people of Khala-Kanti before the arrival of strangers (Western civilization) who relegated tradition to the background, Assumta recounts her childhood experiences:

And one evening, the entire village would witness an endless parade of baskets and basins full of yams, cassava, plantains and cocoa beans. In short, everything that was grown in Khala-Kanti’s fields. The men filled their gourds with their best palm wine and thus a festive meal, a veritable feast, was prepared for the spirits of the forest. Just before the planting began, they implored nature for her leniency. Most importantly, the union between the forest and its inhabitants, a union sanctified by the gods from time immemorial, was celebrated. (24)

Assumta’s recounting of the past is representative of her yearning for the good old days when nature was closest to, and communed with humanity. This kind of communion between the people and the spirits of the forest may now seem farfetched; but in the text we are told that spirits of the forest usually sent words through messengers dressed in plant fibers to express not only their satisfaction, but also the promise of bountiful harvest and the fairest of seasons:

Through its appearance and resonance, each tree thus entered into intimate communication with the inhabitants of Khala-Kanti. Later, when the masked beings were all gathered in a circle at the center of the village, they launched into a mesmerizing and melodious concert that evoked in turn the rumble of thunder, the crackling of fire in the woods, the roar of big cats, the rhythm of hoes digging the soil and even the tinkling of rain on tin roofs. They were faithful interpreters of all the rhythms buried in the village’s innermost depths. (24-25)



To stress the importance of this psucho-spiritual attachment which women in particular have for nature, Assumta says: “Each year she awaited this event with impatience and the forest had never left her, even if the planting ritual was rarely practised in the village anymore” (26). Artistically, Angele Kingue personifies the earth and compares her to a fiance’s seduction to show nature’s closeness to mankind in the physical and the spiritual: “And the earth could be heard waking up under hundreds of steps pressed against her. She could be heard moaning, whispering, tensing, giving herself, offering herself, abandoning herself to the rhythmic caresses of desire from time immemorial” (26).

Clarisse, Assumta’s cousin and friend, accepts the invitation to join Assumta and Bella at the Good Hope Centre in Khala-Kanti after gathering the last pieces of her devastated life. The natural breeze, the comforting songs of the wind and forest and many more natural phenomena help Clarisse to gradually but steadily forget her hurtful past: “She buried the wreckage of her life in this corner of the forest where greedy liana and trees snapped it all up in one night” (109). When Assumta dies, Bella and Clarisse continue to live her dream and keep her legacy alive.

Assumta succeeds in rekindling in Clarisse hope and courage to face life by one’s self. This rekindled hope explains why Assumta’s death is a very big loss to Clarisse. To keep the bond between two sisters, nature is the only channel. Clarisse makes it a habit to always sit or kneel in front of Assumata’s grave. She would talk to her cousin as though she was still by her side. Also, Clarisse makes sure Assumta’s grave and its surroundings were kept very clean. Assumta’s grave becomes a spot of comfort and hope for a brighter tomorrow. No wonder Clarisse says: “She loved these calm moments when there was communion between what she could hear in her heart and what she could see with her eyes” (109).

Having been regenerated through the support and encouragement of Assumta and Bella, Clarisse completely engulfs herself in understanding how to be a part of nature’s character so that what she feels within can be seen and felt outside of her heart and mind: she was beside herself with joy as she bursts out emotionally “She (Clarisse) only dressed in green and golden brown, the



colors of earth and plant life. She felt she was coming alive again. Dressing was her way of extending her mission into what she thought of as external purification” (117).

In one of her sojourns in Brussels, Clarisse meets with Kiki, a beautiful dress shop keeper who markets most of her products by wearing them to attract customers. Kiki inspires Clarisse by telling her: “You don’t need to open your mouth for people to know what you’re thinking. Let your clothes do the talking. Not just through the colour. Let the designs come alive. They are what must convey the state of your soul to the world” (118).

In her own little corner in the forest finds, Clarisse finds herself thinking about Kiki and tells herself that someday, she would find a way to get people to wear their emotions on their bodies in order to find true symbiosis with their environment. She ponders, “Didn’t the people of the southern forest once read the rhythms of their songs from the painted fabrics they wore?” (118). Clarisse resolves to find a way of bringing the plant-dyed and fiber garments back to life, belts made out of leaves, skirts of raffia, wrappers of beaten bark. To show her determination in making this happen, she seeks help from two other women with whom she rakes, hoes, digs and marks the trail for the visitors: a pretty crescent with a hibiscus or daisy hedge (119).

It seems logically sound to argue that if nature is to respond to man more vibrantly, man must begin by treating nature respectfully. Assumta’s large field, which was deforested by the truck drivers, is rejuvenated through Clarisse’s reforestation scheme. This move of hers is evidence that since nature embraces and accepts her, she is bound to protect, sustain and preserve nature at all cost:

Clarisse spent every hour of the day in her garden. She created a tree-lined alley that she named Nourishing Path. On either side of the path, she planted one of each of the species of trees that had been devastated by the truck drivers and their cronies. She took it upon herself to return to the forest the children who had been brutally torn from her arms. (121)



“I can hear her sobbing at night and my heart bleeds” (121). This is Clarisse’s confession to Bella about her communion with mother earth; further evidence that for the ladies of the text, flowing with nature is a matter of the soul, and not just mere bonding. This truth surely accounts for Clarisse’s encounter with nature from day to day. As Kingue puts it, “Clarisse was in her sanctuary, putting this small corner of the universe back together with the relentlessness of a collector in a vandalized museum” (121). Moreover, “She spoke their names (that of the planted trees) with reverence, delighting as she stressed every one of their syllables: acajou, iroko, ilomba, bubinga” (121). This is clear proof that Clarisse seeks to wrap herself in the whole fabric of nature in a mutually beneficial way.

Clarisse’s involvement with and ardent commitment to nature qualifies her to become an environmental specialist who gives natural healing sermons to visitors and inhabitants of Khala-Kanti who find themselves at the Good Hope Centre. This indeed is her own little way of celebrating the wonders of nature through the creation of awareness and effective “conscientization”. A few of her solemn declarations reflect the passion with which Clarisse exalts the beauty of nature through the spiritual healing potentials of the forest: “Let the forest murmur in your ears the keening of your ancestors’ and your children’s anxious despair” (122). Another one of her declarations is that “The trees in the forest aren’t cruel, and whatever people tell you, men still lean against trees.” Clarisse goes on to say “Let the trees support you, let your shadows intermingle” (122).

Angele Kingue uses not only flora but also fauna to showcase the relationship between the trio ladies and nature. We see an aspect of fauna in an argument raised by Clarisse: “This is why the elephant is big; this is why it is strong. It absorbs the ancestors’ sweat. It anoints itself with this celestial nectar” (123). It is worth emphasizing that if Clarisse succeeds in achieving all that she achieves through the reclaiming of Assumta’s land, it will be because Bella gives her the full encouragement and support that she needs.

The Strong Bond of Sorority Exhibited between Women and Nature

In *Venus of Khala-Kanti*, Clarisse does quite a lot in memory of her departed cousin Assumta. She sets up an enclosure around Assumta's grave, beginning with the most vulnerable of all trees, "the tree that even young people, who were well practised in modern forestry techniques, did not dare fell without the elder's permission and benediction" (123). Clarisse also planted the "essingang", a "bubinga" that invited preservation. A mystical tree, the ancestor's cradle, it protected against the wrath of evil spirits. In celebration of thwarted motherhoods all over the world, she planted an "ilomba", whose nourishing and salutary sap purified mothers with big, round fruits, vessels for a juice that chased death away (123). To demonstrate her total attachment to nature especially through the forest, Clarisse completes her forest kingdom as presented below:

Towards the middle of the field, she created a central place for the "tali", tree of trance and audaciousness, and the eboka, whose drop of sap neutralized the impossibility of all illusions. To crown her kingdom, she planted the tree of truth at its entrance, a tree with red-orange flowers of which a single bud would extract secrets lodged in the deepest recesses of the soul. In front of Assumta's grave, she planted the "wenge", a beautiful ornamental tree with purple flowers that scourged itself twice a year, like the Khala-Kanti widows of old to mark the destitution caused by a lover's death. She took great care of this tree which mourned during the rainy season. She called it the tree of life and death. (123-124)

A critical appraisal of the holistic forest Clarisse succeeds in planting reveals that all of mankind's needs are deeply rooted in the forest (trees), which is symbolic of nature in all its ramifications. This explains why she feels much more protected in the forest than she feels outside of it and is certain that Assumta was now free from the sentence of the ancestors. We are told that "Each species had its meaning and its place in the small botanical universe Clarisse had created. Each species governed the thousand contradictory expressions of the whole of mankind" (124).



Angele Kingue situates the trio of women as ambassadors of climate change mitigation through environmental protection, preservation and sustainability: Assumta reclaims her father's land, Bella protects the land and Clarisse rejuvenates the land through the image of the Good Hope Centre. Bella and Clarisse use mere natural artifacts to heal the souls and minds of big and important personalities who come in great number from the cities. They prepare "pepesoup" with first-hand ingredients/spices from their garden, take them around the serene and thought provoking Nourishing Path and preach to them about nature's potentials to eradicate all their human worries. The case of a big dignitary who dreams of his forthcoming appointment that is seemingly being blocked by an unknown enemy is worth mentioning. This is Bella and Clarisse's prescription given to the big dignitary:

....We'll have to extend our walks on the Nourishing Path. Since you started on "pepesoup" and water, you've been doing better, but only the forest will be able to alleviate your conscience. When we're there, close your eyes and tell her everything that's weighing on your heart that you don't dare tell me. You must recover the lost unity between this world and yours. Tell the forest the hunter's prayer. (126)

Such a prescription pushes the big shot to openly confess all his evil acts in the forest alone. Just the confession begins his healing and repentance and inspires his wishes for the moment. The dignitary's confession ends with the following declaration: "Do not punish me. Do not afflict misfortune on my household. My shot was skillful. I killed with respect, not insolence. I will celebrate its spirit for nine days and nine nights" (126).

After contemplating the nature and manner of his life, the dignitary is relieved of his stress: "He now seemed to be doing very well even if, in his view, the sole reasons for the disappearance of his nightmares were Bella and Clarisse's magical virtues" (126). This big shot, just like many others, would never be convinced that Bella and Clarisse did not have supernatural powers with which they carried out their operations. It could be observed that in natural situations, sometimes, a mere withdrawal—from a too familiar environment to a more serene and faraway place where

one can think about prevailing troubles of life—can be one of the ways by which voices can speak to one’s conscience and provide possible solutions for impending worries. This is one of the natural secrets held by Bella and Clarisse that causes many to think that Bella and Clarisse are seers or witch doctors. To illustrate this argument better, Clarisse’s defense of the pureness of their operations to Maleva, Makang, the Secretary General’s wife, confirms nature’s potential healing power:

You see, nature heals me. I hear the foliage whispering. I hear the silent melody of the butterflies and the dancing melody of the breeze. By these means, all my wounds are healed. And that’s what I offer people who come here. We’re all children of the forest, but we’ve forgotten how to communicate with her, how to love her, how to get her [to] heal us. We extract from her whatever we can, with arrogance, with contempt and without gratitude....The forest resents us, and as long as there’s no harmony between her and us, the war will be endless. (135)

Clarisse and Bella succeed in giving life to Assumta’s dream of expanding the Good Hope Centre. Apart from the services that she provides at the centre, Bella makes great strides in employing her entrepreneurial skills. She and Clarisse construct urinals and toilets, open up a craft market centre, produce natural gels for cleaning and, most importantly, natural balms, all from natural products. Their combined efforts go a long way to improve the health situation of the entire community. Such relentlessness and sacrifices do not go unnoticed. Disabled Without Borders, an international NGO, recommends the centre to host their satellite launch shoot. This grand event is expected to foster speedy development in the small village of Khala-Khanti in a myriad ways. The World Bank also recommends the government to emulate Bella’s model project, which is described by World Bank experts in “paternalistic tones”:

She successfully identified a need, a shortage. She used local resources. She transformed everything naturally in its place; she called in experts; she sought information about what was happening elsewhere in order to offer



quality products to her clientele....To businesses like this one, businesses that value local natural and human resources, we are prepared to offer serious financing to help them in their plans for expansion. (142)

Thus, nature's aura pushes a diminutive lady (Bella) to be at the centre of international attraction. In the face of numerous cameras, microphones and tape recorders, Bella boldly makes the following declaration at the satellite launch hosted by Good Hope Centre: "We are women whose fates are intermingled, bound by a past that's heavy with impossibility and a future set with jewels made of desires and dreams. We're no longer afraid of thunder and our feet have learned to land lightly on the moss and rocks of our forest paths" (146).

Following the recommendations of the World Bank above, nature finally smiles at Bella and her cohorts. The natural reward of hard work—which can be an appointment, a recognition, or a promotion or advancement in status—enraptures Bella. The newscast sounded it loudly and clearly: "Madam Bella Mapek, Founding Director of the Good Hope Center, has been appointed Minister of Public Works and Land Use Planning by Presidential decree" (150). The irony here is that Bella receives this great news with mixed feelings since she would trade the center for nothing else. With overwhelming tears of joy in her eyes, Clarisse says "We're at the top, we too have arrived, our ancestors haven't forgotten us" (150).

While the impromptu party thrown at the Good Hope Centre in celebration of Bella's appointment is ongoing, Bella withdraws herself back to nature when her head and mind become too overcrowded with thoughts/dilemmas. Bella moves to Clarisse's garden, where the songs of the birds, the rustling of the leaves and all the small daily noises that anchored her to Khala-Kanti comfort her. Bella crosses the flower garden over to Assumta's grave; she had developed the habit of seeking rejuvenation near her old friend (151). As elaborated below, Bella's withdrawal to a quiet space in nature evidences her unshakable reliance and dependence on nature for all her wants and needs:



The soothing atmosphere of this lush green garden always managed to calm her. She sat down, closed her eyes and saw herself drawing small, interlaced circles in the dirt. She was playing with freshly turned earth, earth that contained her friend, earth that had become her friend. Assumta held her hand out to her, a hand from beyond that carried life and death, a hand at once palpable and invisible, fraternal and deadly. (150)

Bella's communion with Assumta (earth) is symbolic of their eternal bond of sorority. This is Bella in the same kind of contemplative state that her visitors (patients) bring to the Good Hope Centre for their healing. She too displays her urgent need for a solution to her overcrowded mind and runs back to mother earth, who has all the solutions to mankind's troubles. Assumta responds to Bella in like manner: "In turn, Assumta addressed to her an enchanting, reassuring and knowing smile that said 'I understand, I had forgotten'" (151). Assumta's reaction reassures Bella, who now goes on to pour out her heart:

My sister, my daughter, my friend, you of the caste of the immortals, sing my lineage for me, find the signs of my future in the cowries' source, explain to me the meanderings of my life. You used to tell me that I would go far. I thought you were talking about the Center. But you heard the joke they played on me at lunchtime. It's over, it's a trap; they're waiting for me to trip over it, so they can knock me down.... (151)

An emotional outburst of such magnitude definitely awaits a quick natural response. Mother earth, represented by Assumta, communicates a sound message to Bella through Khasia, her lover, to boost her morals. Through the story, one may truly wonder why someone would choose to deny a ministerial appointment. It is therefore glaring, but rather unfortunate, that Bella thinks her dreams will be completely quashed by a government that is good at killing dreams and rendering her citizens desolate. Bella tells Khasia that she is afraid she will have her hands tied. In response, Khasia asks "Which hands are they going to be tying up, my Venus? Show me the hands

they're going to tie up! You're the woman of a thousand ways; you're like your namesake in the forest, Kul Mapek. You cannot be caught, don't ever forget it" (152).

Having found solace in nature's arms, Bella must undergo the ritual cleansing to set the pace for what awaits her in the coming days. In her sleep, she becomes very restless, a state which leaves Khasia with the only option of intervening to calm things down. At this stage, the following dialogue between Bella and Khasia ensues:

"What is it? What's wrong with you? Should I take you to the hospital?" he said.

"No, to the water, to the water" she gasped.

"You want some water?"

"No, I want to go to the water"

Khasia didn't understand.

"Take me to the water," she yelled. "Take me to Maeba"

"To Maeba? Maeba as in the Maeba on the ocean?"

Bella nodded yes.

"Are you sure? It's three hours away, you know?"

"Take me to Maeba, I need to wash myself," she insisted (153).

From the conversation above, we clearly see that Bella shares a very strong bond with the spirits of the waters (another element of nature). Bella seems to project that she needs to wash herself only in the Maeba Ocean for her cleansing to be complete. Also, she insists that she will walk on foot to the ocean no matter the distance. Bella is finally convinced by Khasia and Clarisse to enter a car for the drive to Maeba, where a very surprising event unfolds. Upon arrival, Bella immediately takes off her shoes and walks towards a dune, which she climbs with the agility of someone used to doing so, after which:

Bella was radiant, like an apparition, the wind caused her beautiful white "boubou" to swell and her long braids floated on her shoulders. Her eyes closed, but her head turned toward the sky, absorbing the sun's rays. She came down the ocean side of the dune, undressed and bare-chested, her small



white wrapper around her waist. She headed toward Khasia, collapsing on his chest. He held her very tightly in his arms. They let themselves flop onto the sand. Something had just been confirmed in this embrace, but he didn't know what. (155)

The above mentioned experience between Khasia and Bella speaks of a real encounter between the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the metaphysical realms of nature. This experience leaves Khasia stunned. After a long while, Bella gets up and heads towards the sea without altering a word to her lover. Natural and supernatural forces interplay in Khasia's heart; a voice speaks of him preventing Bella from going, while a more powerful force stops him from doing so. Hence, "Bella glided forward to the water with grace. It looked as if she were floating. Not once did she turn back. The water was nearly up to her shoulders, but Khasia could have sworn that she was not swimming, that she was still walking on the water" (155-156).

All the strange and mystical happenings on the Maeba ocean leave Khasia perplexed, yet he is resolved to see the end. Bella disappears into the ocean all night while Khasia cries out his lungs for want of his lover. The dawn of a new day comes with answers (to his lover's whereabouts) which leave him even more astonished than he was the previous day. Bella finally unveils the truth about her birth to Khasia: "Yes, I know you were worried. I am a daughter of the ocean. My village is about six miles from here. I spent my entire childhood on this beach. I know its every nook by heart" (157).

In an attempt to mend Khasia's broken heart and to assuage his fears at the thought of missing a loved one, Bella reassures him and in the process completes the revelation of her true identity:

I know what you thought, but the sea decided otherwise. I am her daughter. Whatever I do, she watches over me. It is time I tell you the details of my birth. I was born in the water. My mother, who was more than eight months pregnant, fainted at this very spot and the sea's waves pulled me from her womb and carried me, rocked me until people came! No one has ever known how long the two of us floated. (157)



Khasia's declaration reassures Bella that he will be with her all the way when he whispers to her "You are my mermaid of the waters" (157). The two lovers set out to find Bella's daughter Mialo ma Ilali. As they drive on, Bella enfolds herself in nature by closing her eyes to feel and better enjoy the sounds of the sea.

Conclusion

This writer has made a conscious effort, from Angele Kingue's perspective, to unveil the fact that bonding between human beings and nature is more evidently and poignantly demonstrated by women than by men. By exploring features of plot and theme in Angele Kingue's *Venus of Khala-Kanti*, this paper views men as destructive agents of the natural cosmos, while raising women to the position of protectors, promoters and sustainers of fauna and flora. The exploration of Kingue's novel has been enhanced through an exploration of the Ecofeminist critical theory to argue that women and nature relate symbiotically due to a strong bond of sorority which exists between them. For Angele Kingue in *Venus of Khala-Kanti*, the relationship between women, nature and the environment is a matter of the soul.

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