

The Role of Women Leadership in Conservation and Environmental Management in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

This study examines the role of women in conservation and environmental management through the theoretical lens of ecofeminism, focusing on Yellow-Yellow by Kaine Agary and The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives by Lola Shoneyin. Ecofeminism, which critiques the intersection of gender oppression and environmental exploitation, provides a framework for analyzing how female characters navigate ecological and socio-political challenges. This study asserts that both randomly selected texts portray women as central to environmental stewardship, thereby challenging conventional narratives that exclude them from conservation efforts. By highlighting the interconnections between gender, ecology, and power, this paper underscores the need for a feminist ecological perspective in environmental policy and literary studies. Qualitative research methods are adopted for the study via close reading and critical textual analysis. Ultimately, the analysis advocates for a more inclusive approach to environmental management that acknowledges and amplifies women's leadership in fostering ecological sustainability.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, women's leadership, environment*

Introduction

In recent years, women's pivotal role in sustainability efforts and environmental leadership has been increasingly recognised. Women have demonstrated their capacity to lead conservation projects, advocate for sustainable practices, and engage communities in environmental stewardship (Olalekan et al., 2019). Despite this, women are often regarded as minor contributors and receive limited attention, even though their economic and social activities heavily depend on

environmental resources. They frequently face inadequate access to forest resources and lack control over land, capital, and labour, resulting in significant limitations. In societies such as Nigeria, women have traditionally served as custodians of the environment. Yet, their contributions are rarely documented or appreciated (Olalekan et al., *Women Contributions to Sustainable Environments in Nigeria*).

Consequently, most environmental measures designed to mitigate and reverse the adverse effects of human activity tend to marginalize women. Despite significant resource investments, the limited success of male-cantered intervention projects underscores the need for a paradigm shift. Recognising the essential role of gender relations—particularly the contributions of women—is crucial for maintaining and sustaining the environment. This necessitates a departure from the existing status quo toward a system that places women at the centre of environmentally friendly initiatives.

Like many other nations, Nigeria is committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goals and promoting gender equality. Enhancing women's participation in conservation and environmental management aligns with these national and international commitments. It also allows women to leverage their untapped potential to drive positive environmental change. This study acknowledges and explores women's significant contributions to these fields. Traditionally, Nigerian women have played essential roles in natural resource management and environmental protection, but their efforts have often been overlooked or undervalued (Agboola, 2022). Historically, Nigerian women have been responsible for agriculture, water collection, and natural resource management within their communities. Their reliance on nature's resources for food, clean water, fuel, medicinal herbs, income generation, and fresh air fosters a deep connection with the environment. Women often exert significant pressure on the environment as primary dependents on natural resources. However, their roles have been primarily perceived as

domestic and, therefore, excluded from influential decision-making processes related to conservation and environmental management.

This study, therefore, aims to highlight the impact of women's leadership in conservation and environmental management in Nigeria, emphasising the importance of recognising and integrating their contributions into national and global efforts toward sustainability.

Ecofeminism, African Literature, Women and Environmental Sustainability

Ecofeminism, a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, provides the theoretical basis for exploring the interconnected oppression of women and the domination of nature (Glottfelty). This framework emphasises the dual objectives of ending environmental exploitation and gender-based marginalisation. Ecofeminism, also known as ecological feminism, extends traditional feminist principles—such as gender equality and the revaluation of non-patriarchal structures—by integrating a commitment to environmental sustainability. It advocates for a worldview that respects organic processes and holistic connections, promoting values like care and cooperation over aggression and domination (Agboola, 2022).

Early ecofeminist thinkers, such as Carolyn Merchant in the United States and Val Plumwood in Australia, celebrated the association between women and nature as an antidote to environmental destruction. Their writings emphasised nurturing and life-affirming attributes linked with the feminine principle (Susan Buckingham, 2015). Ecofeminism critiques patriarchal structures that exploit both women and nature and proposes alternatives grounded in equality, sustainability, and mutual respect.

African literature has traditionally maintained a deep connection with the environment, reflecting the continent's diverse landscapes and ecological wealth. Narratives within African literature often explore the intricate relationship between humans and nature, challenging

dominant narratives and advocating for inclusive approaches to environmental conservation. African literary works contribute to global discourses on environmental sustainability, emphasising the urgent need to protect natural resources (Gunner and Scheub, 2025).

The role of African women in environmental preservation is deeply rooted in their position as custodians of traditional ecological knowledge. Authors such as Buchi Emecheta, Kaine Agary, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlight the intersection of gender, ecology, and resilience. These works underscore the importance of women's knowledge in preserving natural resources and addressing environmental challenges. Davies and Adebawale (2023: 169) argue that the relationship between women and the environment has been deeply embedded in oral African culture and remains a critical discussion area. Historically, the connection between women and nature has been shaped by systems of oppression, subordination, and subjugation, mirroring the exploitation of the natural world. As a theoretical framework, ecofeminism highlights these structural power imbalances to promote more equitable societies. The discourse on the intersection of women and nature extends beyond Nigeria and is widely examined across various global contexts.

The depiction of women in African literature portrays a spectrum of experiences and challenges, emphasising agency, resilience, and resistance. Scholars such as Carole B. Davies and Anne Adams Graves (1986) have extensively analysed these representations, arguing that African women writers challenge traditional gender roles and reshape cultural narratives. In *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986), Davies examines themes of identity, culture, and gender, showcasing the diversity of women's experiences across African regions and histories. Similarly, Susan Orijemie's article, *The African Woman and Her Future in Fiction* highlights African women writers' contributions to presenting complex female characters and challenging stereotypical depictions (2010). A.P. Busia's analysis of African

women's writing underscores the importance of amplifying women's voices and critiquing patriarchal structures. Busia emphasises how literature serves as a platform to dismantle gender-based oppression and represent the nuanced realities of African women's lives (Busia, 2018).

African women have long been at the forefront of environmental activism, utilising their ecological knowledge and connection to the land to advocate for sustainable practices. Wangari Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed* (2004), illustrates this activism, portraying women's leadership in addressing environmental degradation. Nadine Gordimer, a South African writer, also incorporates environmental themes into her work, highlighting the intrinsic connection between women's livelihoods and the health of the natural world.

African literature embraces ecofeminist principles by exploring the intersection of women's experiences and environmental concerns. Female characters in African literature often resist environmental destruction and advocate for sustainability, reflecting the interconnectedness of gender and ecology. These works amplify women's voices, acknowledging their critical role in environmental preservation. Through these narratives, African literature raises awareness of environmental challenges and inspires action toward sustainability.

Women As Environmental Advocates In Agary's *Yellow Yellow* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

The representation of women in both texts significantly emphasises their roles as environmental advocates. In *Yellow Yellow*, the female characters play a crucial role in promoting the preservation of the Niger Delta region. They challenge governmental and corporate entities, expose the detrimental activities of oil companies, and advocate for environmental justice on behalf of the Niger Delta's inhabitants. Zilayefa said

the judges were so corrupt that a simple case would be adjourned over and over again until the litigants and their lawyers got the message and paid some bribe to the judge. Whoever acted quicker received a judgment in their favour. Such was the way of the justice system (Agary, 106)

The representation of women in this context offers a profound exploration of gender dynamics within Nigerian society. Through a nuanced narrative and a diverse cast of characters, Agary Kaine highlights women's multifaceted roles, challenges, strengths, and aspirations. She portrays them as complex individuals with agency, navigating strength and vulnerability while asserting control over their lives.

At the novel's outset, women are depicted fulfilling traditional roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, reflecting deeply rooted societal expectations. Characters such as Mama Ebiye and Bibi (Yellow's mother) exemplify these roles, dedicating themselves to familial responsibilities despite their ambitions. This portrayal underscores the pressures and constraints imposed by traditional gender norms, emphasising the difficulty of balancing familial obligations with individual aspirations.

However, *Yellow Yellow* also showcases women who actively pursue their dreams despite numerous challenges. Lolo is a compelling example of a character who takes charge of her life, embodying resilience and determination in the face of adversity.

She knew the value of her name in Port Harcourt, and she knew how to use it to open doors' (Agary, 59)

This was Clara giving Zilayefa information about Lolo, about how much she has achieved, letting her understand that Lolo na small girl o, she is just Twenty-

five, but no take her age judges her o, she is small but mighty (Agary, 59).

Sisi (Madam George), who was also a woman of immense importance in society, the woman who built her life from scratch despite being a primary school dropout,

she was so business savvy and creative that she was good at coming up with ideas for projects that she would sell to the procurement officer of an establishment.... when she started, she was the only woman in Port Harcourt who won contracts of large value from most companies, and she was the only woman that period, who had contracts from the oil companies.... She also owned property in old GRA, where she lived. (Agary, 54-55).

Clara made the statement by introducing Zilayefa to Sisi and highlighting Sisi's significance within their society. Agary employs characters such as Lolo and Sisi to emphasise women's vital societal roles and positive contributions to their communities. Despite numerous challenges, the female characters in *Yellow Yellow* demonstrate resilience and strength in navigating their circumstances. For instance, Zilayefa's mother, Bibi, singlehandedly raised her daughter after being abandoned by the man who impregnated her. Bibi ensured that Zilayefa's needs were met and prioritised her education, striving to prevent her from repeating the mistakes she made, such as her naivety in falling for a white man. Through such portrayals, the women in the novel challenge stereotypes and inspire hope for transformative change, exploring the complexities of female identity in the context of societal expectations and personal aspirations.

Similarly, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin Lola presents women as agents of their own lives, making decisions and exercising control over their circumstances. Iya Segi, the first wife, is depicted as a

figure of authority and influence within the household. She manages the household, oversees the responsibilities of the other wives, and ensures the well-being of the children. Her strong will and pragmatism are evident in her role as the family's matriarch, as highlighted when Iya Tope refers to her as "our mother of the house" (Shoneyin, 50). Iya Segi's distribution of weekly provisions further reflects her leadership and responsibility within the household, portraying her as a central and influential figure. Her position is stated thus.

I want him to believe he does, but I am the one that keeps this household together.... Now, I have eight cement shops in Ibadan alone, and my wealth swells by the day. (Shoneyin, 99).

This shows how she takes pride in her role and uses her position to exert control and ensure the smooth functioning of the household. Despite rivalries, the wives showed solidarity and support, which illustrates the power of female relationships.

Bolanle is a remarkable character in the novel, defined by her resilience, intelligence, and determination to shape her life despite significant challenges. As an educated and independent woman, she defies societal norms by pursuing her career and ambitions. Additionally, she is a protector and advocate for the children in the household, including her unborn child. Bolanle strives to create a nurturing and supportive environment for the children while embodying sustainability and ethical living values.

Her environmental advocacy is expressed through her actions and attitudes toward sustainability, resource conservation, and ethical consumption. Throughout the narrative, Bolanle demonstrates mindfulness about her environmental impact, consciously adopting practices that reduce waste and conserve resources. For example, after burning some materials, she ensures the environment remains clean by burying the remaining shards in the soil to prevent littering: "When the

fire died, I gathered scattered shards, dug a hole in the warm soil, and buried them” (Shoneyin, 91). Furthermore, despite the luxury afforded by her husband, Bolanle chooses simplicity in her cooking and household management, using locally sourced ingredients and minimising waste. Her actions reflect a commitment to sustainability and an appreciation for nature, reinforcing her values of ethical living.

In *Yellow Yellow*, Bibi also exemplifies environmental advocacy through her efforts to expose government and corporate corruption and the exploitative practices that contribute to environmental degradation. Her leadership in challenging these oppressive power structures underscores the vital role of women in environmental activism. Bibi’s stories about her youth highlight the environmental changes brought about by exploitation and inspire her daughter, Zilayefa, to draw parallels between past and present circumstances. This intergenerational perspective emphasises the enduring importance of women’s contributions to environmental awareness and advocacy.

Nowadays, the men were even more oppressive than the women They demanded a healthy meal... cobwebs would fill the pots during the time that passed before the men contributed to the feeding expenses of the household. The men claimed that according to tradition, it was their exclusive right to make all the decisions inside and outside the home (Agary, 40)

This portrayal highlights women’s roles as caretakers, emphasising their responsibility for providing healthy meals for their families. This duty often fosters environmentally conscious behaviours, such as purchasing fresh, locally sourced ingredients and minimising food waste through effective meal planning. In contrast, the men in the story are depicted as neglectful and disengaged from household responsibilities, including financial contributions. This lack of involvement can result in increased waste and energy consumption

due to their disregard for efficient household management. These contrasting roles suggest that women's focus on household care and meal provision encourages more sustainable and environmentally responsible behaviours, underscoring the importance of recognising and amplifying women's voices in environmental decision-making processes.

Similarly, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Bolanle exemplifies female leadership and activism in environmental conservation. As a university-educated wife, she advocates for sustainable farming practices, emphasising reducing harmful chemical use and promoting organic manure. Bolanle believes that such practices not only enhance crop yields but also contribute to long-term environmental preservation. Her pursuit of education and aspirations to become a pharmacist further reflects her commitment to societal well-being. She aims to address critical issues such as public health and access to healthcare through her knowledge and skills, demonstrating how personal growth and professional development can align with broader environmental and ethical ideals.

Through activism and advocacy, Bolanle's character illustrates women's significant role in environmental conservation, a pivotal attribute of ecofeminism. Her efforts showcase how women's contributions, particularly in rural areas where they often dominate farming and agricultural activities, can lead to meaningful change. Women's responsibilities as primary caretakers of the environment position them as crucial stakeholders in initiatives promoting conservation and sustainable practices. Addressing women's concerns and integrating their perspectives makes developing effective and inclusive environmental policies possible.

Bolanle's upbringing also influences her environmental consciousness. Her mother played a key role in nurturing her awareness of environmental care. During one of Bolanle's visits to her parent's

house, she reflects on her mother's disgust at the sight of weeds growing on the fence of their bungalow. This anecdote highlights the intergenerational transmission of values related to environmental stewardship, reinforcing the importance of family influence in shaping attitudes toward sustainability. Bolanle's activism demonstrates that women's contributions to environmental conservation are invaluable and can drive substantial change. She said,

I walked through the gate of the bungalows and was immediately struck by the weeds that had grown around the section of fence that my parent bungalow leaned against. Given that Mama cleaned religiously for the fear of being associated with dirt, I was surprised to see bits of paper strewn around our doorway. Mama would not have let that pass when I was living at home; she would have called me into her room and made known her disgust.... (Shoneyin, 132-133).

The excerpt illustrates Bolanle's mother's aversion to environmental uncleanliness and her emphasis on instilling these values in her daughters. This upbringing significantly influenced Bolanle's commitment to environmental management and sustainability. Similarly, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, environmental degradation, exemplified by soil erosion and poor crop yields, leads to food insecurity and poverty. These consequences are particularly severe for marginalised communities, where women are disproportionately affected due to their roles within households and communities. The novel portrays how environmental degradation directly impacts the lives of women in a polygamous family in Nigeria, disrupting agricultural practices and exacerbating economic hardships. This is a poignant illustration of how marginalised communities bear the brunt of environmental challenges, significantly affecting their ability to thrive.

The narrative emphasises that women, especially in rural areas, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation because of their roles as primary food providers and caretakers. When environmental changes reduce food resources, women often shoulder additional responsibilities to meet their families' basic needs. This increased burden can result in heightened stress, mental health challenges, and physical exhaustion. Furthermore, women frequently face limited access to critical resources, such as education and financial support, which restricts their capacity to adapt to environmental changes and mitigate their effects. Iya Tope narrates.

I was the compensation for failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket... I didn't weep for my mother, my father, or even my siblings. It was because of the weeds I did not get the chance to uproot that year that bothered me (Shoneyin, 80-1)

The above excerpt highlights that Iya Tope was married off due to the poor yields from her father's farmland, a consequence of environmental degradation that directly impacted her life. Despite her challenges, Iya Tope remained concerned about the weeds she could not uproot that year a responsibility tied to her role in sustaining the environment. This concern underscores her duty toward environmental stewardship, even though other family members, such as her siblings, could have assumed the task.

This scenario reflects the disproportionate burden women often bear as they take on additional responsibilities in the face of environmental challenges. Their roles as caretakers and environmental managers frequently place them at the forefront of efforts to sustain their households and communities, even under adverse circumstances.

Both texts underscore the crucial role of women as advocates for the environment, highlighting their leadership in conservation and environmental management. Women's unique perspectives and deep

understanding of environmental degradation's consequences position them as essential agents of change in promoting sustainable practices and addressing ecological challenges.

Policy-Making and Community Engagement in Environmental Conservation

Environmental conservation has become a critical global concern, particularly in Nigeria, necessitating collaborative efforts between policymakers and local communities. A holistic approach that integrates top-down governance with bottom-up, community-driven solutions is essential to achieve sustainable and effective environmental conservation. The following frameworks are recommended to enhance policy effectiveness and community engagement:

1. Strengthening Policy Frameworks

The government must establish clear and enforceable environmental laws to ensure accountability and compliance. No individual or entity should be exempt from legal consequences when violating environmental regulations. Additionally, policies should be inclusive, considering local socio-economic conditions to foster equitable and practical implementation.

2. Enhancing Community Participation

Creating platforms for community engagement, such as town hall meetings and participatory decision-making forums, is crucial for ensuring inclusive conservation efforts. Providing incentives for local conservation initiatives can further encourage active participation and commitment from community members.

3. Integrating Science and Indigenous Knowledge

Effective conservation strategies require collaboration between scientists, policymakers, and indigenous groups. Such cooperation fosters complementarity between modern scientific approaches and traditional ecological knowledge. Policymakers should actively support

research on indigenous environmental practices and their integration into contemporary conservation frameworks.

4. Education and Capacity Building

Environmental education should be promoted at all levels, from formal schooling to community-based awareness programs. Additionally, training local communities in sustainable resource management practices will empower them to take ownership of conservation efforts and contribute to long-term environmental sustainability.

By implementing these frameworks, Nigeria can develop a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to environmental conservation, ensuring policy effectiveness and active community participation.

Conclusion

The analysis of women's leadership in conservation and environmental management in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* highlights women's diverse and indispensable roles in promoting environmental sustainability within patriarchal contexts. Both texts depict women as pivotal actors in resource management, demonstrating resilience, innovation, and agency despite the systemic barriers imposed by their sociocultural environments. These literary narratives collectively illuminate the often-overlooked potential of women as leaders in environmental management and advocate for their active inclusion in policy-making and conservation initiatives. By portraying women as both victims of environmental degradation and stewards of sustainability, Agary and Shoneyin challenge traditional gender roles and call for a critical reassessment of gender dynamics in environmental governance. Ultimately, the texts argue that empowering women in leadership is not merely an issue of social justice but a prerequisite for achieving sustainable environmental and societal progress.

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