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Reimagining ecological justice: Intersections of *Unhu* and African eco-feminism in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Tsitsi Mapepa's *Ndima Ndima*

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Abstract

This article employs the concepts of *Unhu* (the Shona term for ethical human behaviour) and African eco-feminism to analyse how Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1973) and Tsitsi Mapepa's *Ndima Ndima* (2023) engage with ecological justice. It focuses on how the texts appeal to *Unhu* principles of mutual respect, shared responsibility, respect for nature, and community empowerment in their call for ethical custodianship of the environment in the face of increasing ecological injustice. Examining the experiences of the central characters, the article interprets the two novels as feminist ecological narratives that mobilise nature as a political agent for challenging gender inequality and environmental injustice. It argues that both novels harness feminist sensibilities and indigenous ecological philosophy to critique social injustice and anthropocentrism. Thus, the article is situated at the intersection of African philosophy and eco-feminism, enabling it to innovatively assert the critical role of African literary imagination in re-grounding indigenous conservation epistemologies.

Keywords: Ecological justice, Zimbabwean literature, African eco-feminism, *Unhu,* African philosophy

Introduction: Ecological crises, justice and discourses

Anthropocentrism, or the privileging of human welfare over that of other actors in the universe, remains a significant threat to ecological justice. Several scholars, including Baxter (2005), White (2008), Kopnina and Washington (2019), and Wienhues (2020) have challenged this human-centred worldview, contending that non-human species are also entitled to the Earth's resources and highlighting the urgent need for ecological practices that promote mutually beneficial relationships between humans and non-humans. These scholars attribute contemporary ecological crises, including climate change and loss of biodiversity, to anthropocentrism. They argue for rethinking entitlements over the Earth and its resources, advocating for a justice framework that simultaneously pursues social and ecological justice. However, the West, which remains the primary beneficiary of imperialist extractive practices, dominates global conversations on environmentalism, excluding ideological alternatives from the Global South (Roy 2018).

Much of the scholarship on environmental management problems in Africa has come from African philosophy, anthropology, geography, and environmental science (Mawere 2014). However, escalating ecological crises have provided fertile ground for literary imagination that reimagines ecological justice as inseparable from social justice. Although ecology falls within the broader category of biology and the natural sciences, literature, especially African literary imagination, has played a significant role in highlighting pertinent ecological issues and proposing ideological alternatives that are otherwise overlooked in mainstream ecological discourses. It is uniquely positioned to bridge social and ecological justice because of its affective, narrative and symbolic powers.

Akingbe (2024) demonstrates how the South African poet Gabeba Baderoon, for example, uses poetry to raise awareness about the urgent need for remedies that can concurrently address ecological and social injustice, in her anthologies *A Hundred Silences* (2005), *The Museum of Ordinary Life* (2005), *The Dream in the Next Body* (2005), and *The History of Intimacy* (2018). Iheka (2018) highlights how African writers such as Bessie Head, Amos Tutuola, John Maxwell Coetzee, and Ben Okri have also narrated the impact of Western extractive cultures on Africa's ecosystems and vulnerable populations. Similarly, Nare et al. (2024) highlight the ecological harm caused by multinational corporations in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), which is set in postcolonial Cameroon. Ossana's (2024) reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Noor* (2021) highlights how the novel challenges the Western notion of a wasteland by depicting a desert landscape as a site for the flourishing of beauty, humanity, and intersubjectivity for Nigerian Fulani characters. All these literary studies call for Africa to reinvent its ecological philosophy as they highlight fundamental (dis)connections between African and Western attitudes towards the natural environment, evident in the complex relations existing among humans and non-humans in both contexts.

Critical attention to ecological issues in Zimbabwean literature is still developing and dispersed, often revolving around a few literary texts, including Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* (1996), and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). Much of this scholarship explores how the colonial experience weakened indigenous people's spiritual connections with their physical environment (Vambe 2013). Some critics have explored the intersections of ecological injustice and gender inequality through the lens of African eco-feminism, an African-centred feminist and ecological justice movement with cultural, philosophical, and literary dimensions. This movement seeks to challenge the interconnected injustices against women and the physical environment under patriarchal and capitalist systems (Tamale 2020). In that line of thinking, Mutekwa and Musanga (2013) and

Dlodlo (2024), for example, draw parallels between the domination of nature and the oppression of women in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, which signals a critical tropism towards grounding women's sensibilities in their relationships with nature.

To innovatively contribute to ongoing conversations about the need for an African-centred ecological justice framework to address climate crises on the continent, this article employs the intersecting lenses of African eco-feminism and the Shona philosophy of *Unhu* to analyse two Zimbabwean novels: Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1973) and Tsitsi Mapepa's *Ndima Ndima* (2023). *Unhu* is a relational ontology that denotes ethical human behaviour and is rooted, among other principles, in community empowerment, collective responsibility, and reverence for nature (Magosvongwe 2016; Samkange and Samkange 1980). By emphasising collective environmental stewardship and the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans, *Unhu* offers a counterpoint to what Wynter (2003) sees as the individualist and anthropocentric underpinnings of Western humanism, manifesting in colonial 'extractivism'.[1] In critiquing anthropocentrism, the article highlights how *Unhu* has a place and role in the African eco-feminist literary imagination's call for social and ecological justice. It aligns with Braidotti's (2013) idea of posthumanism, which critiques classical Western humanism for centring the human, often the white male, and disregarding the inherent interconnectedness of humans with other life forms.

Reading *The Grass is Singing* alongside *Ndima Ndima*, published fifty years apart, is not meant to diminish their historical specificities, including the peculiar ways in which the texts depict shifts in land tenure systems, climate crises, and postcolonial gender politics, but to reveal insights at the intersections of race and temporality. The former is authored by a white writer and set in the colonial period, while the latter, by a black author, has a postcolonial setting. Reading a white-authored novel using an *Unhu* lens complicates the racialisation of *Unhu* (humaneness) as an exclusive quality of indigenous peoples, showing that non-Blacks, such as Dick Turner in *The Grass is Singing*, can also practise *Unhu*. Exploring how Zimbabwean women's ecological imagination has evolved from colonial to postcolonial times can illuminate continuities and ruptures in literary engagements with environmental and social justice issues. Thus, in juxtaposing the two novels, we seek to answer the questions: How do the narratives, half a century apart, reimagine social and environmental justice through *Unhu* and African eco-feminist lenses? What insights do they yield around Zimbabwean women's relationship with the physical environment and *Unhu* relational ethics? And, lastly, how can African eco-feminism be read as an expression and performance of *Unhu*? By addressing these questions, the article reaffirms the vital contributions of Zimbabwean women authors to African and global feminist ecological imaginations.

Following this introduction, we present the methodological and theoretical frameworks for this study, followed by synopses of the primary texts. The first analytical section explores the representation of human-nature relationships in *The Grass is Singing*. It argues that we can use the lens of *Unhu* to understand the complex everyday interactions between Lessing's characters and nature. The second analytical section focuses on how *Ndima Ndima* invokes *Unhu* and African eco-feminism to critique ecological injustice and advocate for an ecological approach based on complementarity between males and females.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework: *Unhu,* eco-feminist inequalities, and justice

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative approach that entails a nuanced analysis of themes and narrative means used to unravel the intersections of *Unhu* and African eco-feminism in *The Grass is Singing* and *Ndima Ndima*. Through a comparative analysis of *The Grass is Singing*

and *Ndima Ndima*, the article highlights how the temporal gap between the texts allows a diachronic analysis of the intersections of environmental and gender justice discourses in Zimbabwean literature.

The theoretical framework integrates African eco-feminism and the philosophy of *Unhu*, a Shona variant of the African relational ethic of *Ubuntu*,[2] whose foundational values include interdependence, respect for life, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and participatory decision-making (Samkange and Samkange 1980). In Shona cosmology, *Unhu* denotes ethical human behaviour and requires that humans live in harmony with each other, their surroundings, gods, and ancestors (Magosvongwe 2016; Taringa 2006). In this holistic worldview, the natural world, the living, and the deceased are all components of an extensive ecological system that includes all fauna and flora, as well as sentient and non-sentient beings. In this unified whole, the pursuit of individual interests should not compromise the well-being of other entities in the universe (Magosvongwe 2016; Samkange and Samkange 1980). Thus, *Unhu*'s advocacy for collective responsibility and interspecies harmony contrasts with anthropocentric and extractivist cultures that scholars such as Braidotti (2013), Roy (2018), and Wienhues (2020) associate with Western epistemologies.

From an ecological perspective, *Unhu* promotes the ecological balance and fair distribution of environmental benefits and harms and calls for humans to respect nature. Nature is understood, within a Zimbabwean context, as a powerful and living presence that actively shapes cultural, spiritual, and political lives (Samkange and Samkange 1980). We contend that *Unhu* offers a comprehensive approach to achieving ecological justice, which can be adapted as a template for environmental conservation initiatives, sustainable resource extraction, and the harmonious co-existence of humans with other species. The *Unhu*-driven ecological justice framework requires that humans forge an ontology of togetherness in which differences are subordinated to intersubjectivity.

We engage the philosophy of *Unhu* to frame our analysis of how *The Grass is Singing* and *Ndima Ndima* establish a causal relationship between ecological injustice and unethical human practices. Although the authors may not have been inspired by the concept of *Unhu* when writing, the two novels highlight the ethics of communal harmony, reverence for nature, and human interconnectedness, which are *Unhu* values. *The Grass is Singing* underscores how ecological injustice arises from a colonial anthropocentric ideology that accords no ethical consideration to indigenous peoples and non-human constituents of the biosphere. The novel foregrounds unethical stewardship of the land and thus invokes an *Unhu*-driven ecological thinking that recognises the land and all other components of the natural environment as being entitled to justice. Of particular interest in Lessing's novel is how the lack of *Unhu* can be interpreted to highlight its importance as both an ecological and a social justice framework. In *Ndima Ndima*, Zuva, the female protagonist, embodies *Unhu* through her kindness, compassion, and sense of responsibility, which extend beyond her immediate family. Her strong connection with the supernatural order of life, evidenced by her communion with ancestral spirits, allows her to appeal for salvation in times of adversity, such as drought and illness. This connection highlights the symbiosis between humans and non-humans, aligning with Magosvongwe's (2016) view of *Unhu* as a unifying philosophy that underscores moral uprightness and a sense of oneness with the earth.

In our reading of both texts, we focus on how an *Unhu* ecological philosophy coheres with African eco-feminism in critiquing anthropocentric and masculinist tendencies. Integrating feminism and the critique of ecological injustices, African eco-feminism maintains that the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment are interconnected and that women

pose both as victims of ecological crises and agents for ecological justice (Tamale 2020). We read *The Grass is Singing* and *Ndima Ndima* as feminist ecological narratives that espouse eco-feminist principles and harness nature as a political agent for challenging androcentrism and anthropocentrism. African eco-feminism draws from indigenous lived experiences and knowledge systems to create an eco-friendly and gender-inclusive Africa and, by extension seeks to reinvent power hierarchies and knowledge production economies to balance social and ecological health (Tamale 2020, 49–52). It further espouses an intersectional approach that can unravel the entangled hegemonies of colonialism, anthropocentrism, and patriarchy in *The Grass is Singing*. It is also suitable for exploring the intersections of gender, women's leadership, spirituality, black anthropocentrism, and interspecies relations in *Ndima Ndima*.

Given that African eco-feminism leverages indigenous epistemologies to pursue social, epistemic, and environmental justice for indigenous societies, it can be considered an integral component of the broader *Unhu/Ubuntu* discourse. We consider Lessing's and Mapepa's eco-feminist concerns to be calls for deploying *Unhu* ethics to promote ethical environmental stewardship. In that way, the study responds to increasing emphasis on 'situated knowledges' in feminist discourses, aimed at challenging Western universalism (Shiva and Mies 2014; Haraway 1988). Therefore, the integration of African eco-feminism and *Unhu* can provide a powerful interdisciplinary framework for exploring embodied and relational ways of knowing, one that reframes women not merely as victims of social and ecological injustice but also as environmental stewards. It allows us to innovatively critique the exclusion of African environmental conservation ethics from mainstream ecological discourses and offer a framework for inclusive ecological justice. However, we acknowledge what Taringa (2006) sees as the risk of romanticising indigenous African people's relationships with nature, which problematically obscures their underlying ambivalences. Therefore, besides remaining reflexive, we are alive to such ambivalences as our reading of *Ndima Ndima* reveals.

Novels' synopses

Set in colonial Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the 1940s, Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* marks an entry point into Zimbabwean feminist writing and ecological injustice. At the beginning of the novel, Mary Turner, a white woman and wife of Dick Turner, is murdered by Moses, her black houseboy. Foregrounded in the novel is the poverty of the Turners, which isolates them from other white farmers in the district. The economic failure of the Turners is contrasted with the success of Charlie Slatter, a profit-oriented, 'archetypal colonialist and fortune hunter' (Mutekwa and Musanga 2013, 243), who practices unsustainable farming methods and treats his black servants cruelly. Mary is not well adjusted to this remote, agrarian setup, especially since she desires an urban life, which is inconsistent with Dick's vision. Mary manifests open hatred for black farm workers, and her relationship with them is marked by tension. However, she gradually becomes dependent on Moses for emotional support and companionship when her physical and mental health deteriorates. Even then, her relationship with him remains complicated, as she is still obsessed with her sense of racial superiority. The narrative ends with the arrest of Moses, leaving the white community in a state of shock and denial and trying to cover up the fact of Mary's relationship with a native.

Tsitsi Mapepa's *Ndima Ndima* is published fifty years after *The Grass is Singing*. The novel is set primarily in the capital city, Harare, with parts of the narrative taking place in the town of Marondera and rural Manicaland. The narrative begins in the post-independence period but offers

vignettes of the past, especially the liberation war of the 1970s. The plot is dense, with three interweaving sub-narratives. The main plot foregrounds the experiences of the Taha family, made up of Mwedzi (the father), Zuva Mutongi (the mother), and their four daughters, Ruth, Abigail, Hannah, and Nyeredzi. The focal point of this plot is Zuva's powerful personality, characterised by kindness, hard work, and environmental awareness. As both a traditional chief and a church leader, Zuva represents a point of convergence between indigenous spirituality and Christian faith. Owing to her royal position, deep cultural knowledge, and strong spiritual connections, the community relies on Zuva for guidance in carrying out traditional rituals, as exemplified by her leading role in the 'Ndima Ndima' rainmaking ceremony. The second strand of the narrative focuses on Zuva's past, including her upbringing, her experiences as a war combatant, and her rise to chieftainship amid power struggles with her siblings. The third subplot traces the development of the Taha daughters, focusing on the youngest, Nyeredzi, who is seven years old at the beginning of the narrative. Considerable narrative space is given to how Nyeredzi discovers her special connection to the ancestors, develops a strong connection to the environment, and ultimately becomes Zuva's successor in the spiritual role.

Colonial Anthropocentrism and *Unhu* in *The Grass is Singing*

In his reading of *The Grass is Singing*, Iheka (2018) adopts a postcolonial eco-critical approach to highlight the ecological harm associated with white anthropocentrism. He argues that the colonial experience brought environmental injustice and attenuated indigenous people's environmental conservation ethics. Also, reading from a post-colonial ecocritical perspective, Kandemiri (2018) explores how ecological concerns intersect with social injustice, arguing that the novel calls for an integrated intervention approach to justice.

Mutekwa and Musanga (2013), meanwhile, draw on eco-feminism, deep ecology, and social ecology to explore the intersections between gender and environmental issues in *The Grass is Singing* and Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* (1996). They argue that women's oppression and the exploitation of the environment are both gendered processes since colonialism, which exploits both women and the environment, is a masculine discourse (Mutekwa and Musanga 2013, 242). Mutekwa and Musanga suggest that *Unhu* can be engaged in combating environmental injustice. However, they insist that since *Unhu* is a phallocentric philosophy, 'a narrative of the fathers' (2013, 255), it should be subordinated to other environmental justice discourses such as eco-feminism and deep ecology. While acknowledging that *Unhu* emerged within a patriarchal context, we contend that its ethics of human interconnectedness, community empowerment, and reverence for nature can make it a principal framework for pursuing both social justice and ecological sustainability. Also, Mutekwa and Musanga do not illustrate the applicability of an *Unhu* ecological philosophy to *The Grass is Singing*.

The review of literature on *The Grass is Singing* above highlights the thematic complexity and timelessness of the novel since it continues to inspire conversations on ecological and social justice. To contribute significantly to this scholarship, we centre *Unhu* in Lessing's call for social and ecological justice in *The Grass is Singing,* and argue that *Unhu*'s emphasis on equity, reciprocity, shared custodianship of natural resources, and community empowerment provides an appropriate framework for untangling the intertwined hegemonies of colonialism and patriarchy in the novel. Thus, we see African eco-feminism and other African-centred discourses of ecological justice as inherently *Ubuntu/Unhu*-driven.

In *The Grass is Singing*, the absence of ethical environmental stewardship reflects the broader lack of *Unhu* ethos in the way humans interact among themselves and with the environment. The novel portrays strained interracial relations characterised by the exploitation and prejudicial undervaluing of indigenous people. In the novel, black people are hardly viewed 'as human beings' (21), and this racial prejudice is explicitly conveyed through expressions such as: 'A white person may look at a native, who is no better than a dog' (176). Similarly, Mary refers to Moses as 'this black animal' (147). The bestial imagery relegates indigenous people to subhumanity and non-personhood, a view reinforced by the inhuman treatment of black farm workers by Slatter and Mary. Slatter believes 'in farming with the sjambok' (15), a weapon used for taming animals. Likewise, Mary strikes one of the black farm workers across the face with a whip (146). The dehumanising treatment of farm workers by Slatter and Mary is inconsistent with the definition of *Unhu*, as '[t]he attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people, a code of behaviour, an attitude toward others and to life' (Samkange and Samkange 1980, 39). These acts of overt violence are manifestations of the broader systemic and epistemic violence that underpins the colonial order and its subsystems, which include capitalism, anthropocentrism, and the displacement of indigenous environmental conservation epistemologies. This violence has displaced the native, denied his existence, and severed him from his land and life-supporting resources.

The level of racial prejudice against black people in *The Grass is Singing* is evidence that Slatter and Mary view the farm workers as a non-human resource to be exploited, just like the land. With such a reductive and exploitative mindset, these settler farmers cannot be expected to use the land sustainably. In this line of thinking, Nhemachena and Matowanyika pose the pertinent question: 'If colonialists failed to master the fact that Africans were human beings, with human essence contrary to animals, how can the same colonialists claim mastery over nature and knowledge?' (2020, 6). Unsurprisingly, Slatter is unable to relate ethically to his farmland, towards which he displays the same parasitic attitude that he shows to his workers:

> He did not improve his farm more than was essential for the purpose of making money from it. He had five hundred acres of the most beautiful rich dark soil, which in the old days had produced twenty-five and thirty bags of mealies to the acre. Year after year he had squeezed that soil, until by now he got five bags an acre if he was lucky. He never dreamed of fertilizing. He cut down his trees (such as those that remained when the mining companies had done) to sell as firewood. […] had so many cattle and the grazing was thin and poor. (211)

Here, the narrative emphasises the dire consequences of Slatter's instrumentalist approach towards the land, which include land degradation, loss of soil fertility, and declining productivity. Slatter's lack of respect for the land underscores how Lessing uses symbolic characterisation to expose the absence of *Unhu* in settler extractivism. Slatter embodies an ecological disposition that radically departs from *Unhu*'s emphasis on reverence for the natural environment. In the Shona cosmology, '*Unhu* is intertwined with the land, which is regarded as sacred' (Magosvongwe 2016, 160). Therefore, from the Shona perspective, Slatter's 'pillage mentality' (Mutekwa and Musanga 2013, 244) and lack of a sense of responsibility dehumanise him, considering that what partly defines *Unhu* in Shona society is environmentally friendly behaviour (Magosvongwe 2016).

Mary shares Slatter's anthropocentric and Eurocentric sentiments, viewing the farm 'as a machine for making money' (151). She shows no appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of the natural environment and loathes the stretches of grasslands on the outskirts of the city, giving Dick

'no credit for the way he looked after his soil, for that hundred acres of trees' (151). She is only tangentially connected to the farm, and on rare occasions when she is directly involved with the workers and farm operations, she demonstrates a disconnection from ethical management practices. Her insistence that Dick grows tobacco, 'an inhuman crop' (151), betrays her mercenary approach to farming, which is confirmed by her inability to understand 'why [Dick should] have a conscience when no one else did' (161). Mary's disregard for ethics and sustainable land use reflects the broader inability of the white settler community to forge a harmonious and sustainable relationship with the African landscape. However, Mary's eventual realisation that Moses is, indeed, a reliable human being exposes the entanglements of race and gender, showing that prejudices are not a permanent or inherent aspect of human nature but rather acquired dispositions that can be unlearned.

Dick complicates the association of white characters with anthropocentrism and unethical farming practices. Mutekwa and Musanga view Dick as Slatter's antithesis, as he 'represents the alternative ecocentric, deep ecological environmental philosophy,' as attested by the condition of his farm, which is 'well-conserved if not prosperous' (243). Unlike Slatter, who has cut down almost every tree that was on his farm, Dick's house is surrounded by a 'thick encroaching bush' (29). In many ways, Dick has a genuine concern for his land; 'he loved it and was part of it' (151). He declines Mary's suggestion that they should also grow tobacco on the farm, as other farmers make huge profits from it (155). His response to Mary, 'And when we have made all that money, what shall we do?' (151) reveals that his relationship with the farm is not driven by capitalist greed. Indeed, his attachment to his farmland is evident in the following passage:

> He certainly could not think of himself anywhere but on this farm: he knew every tree on it. This is no figure of speech: he knew the veld he lived from as the natives know it. His was not the sentimental love of the townsman. His senses had been sharpened to the noise of the wind, the song of the birds, the feel of the soil, changes in weather - but they had been dulled to everything else. (154)

In the passage above, Dick's knowledge of the veld is likened to that of the natives. There are also numerous other textual references to how Dick 'seemed to be growing into a native' (172) in terms of his mannerisms, complexion, and interaction with natives. Symbolically, Dick's association with indigenous people and his ability to recognise them as human beings (*vanhu*) qualify him as a *munhu*, a humane person. For example, Dick rebukes Mary for ill-treating a servant: 'He's a human being, isn't he? He's got to eat' (95). On another occasion, he shows compassion for Moses when Mary inhumanely dismisses him from work: 'Dick was really sorry to see the end of this nigger! She could not understand any white person feeling anything personal about a native' (78). The emphasis here is on the sharp contrast in the way Dick and Mary perceive natives; Dick 'does not conform to the tenets of white domination' (Mutekwa and Musanga 2013, 247), which entails treating natives as sub-human. This explains why other whites in the neighbourhood have ostracised him.

Therefore, it can be argued that Dick's performance of *Unhu*, both in terms of his ecological disposition and interaction with indigenous people, unsettles entrenched racial categories and shows that *Unhu* is not limited to indigenous Africans. According to Samkange and Samkange (1980, 39), 'traits or attributes of *unhuism* are not exclusive to the Bantu even though, in its entirety, the concept is'. Several African novels depict White people who are environmentally friendly, including Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) and William Boyd's *A Good Man in Africa* (1982). Therefore, through Dick's humanity,

Lessing not only demonstrates that non-Africans can also perform *Unhu* but also gestures at the possibility of a trans-racial humanism that can give rise to both social and ecological justice. This resonates with Braidotti's (2013) concept of posthumanism, which critiques (Western) classical humanism for centring the human, often the white male, and overlooking the human's interconnectedness with other life forms. Braidotti defines the posthuman subject in terms of its connections with other humans and non-human entities, which is evoked by Dick's latent *Unhu* sensibility.

However, despite his generally eco-friendly behaviour, Dick also deviates from *Unhu* principles in some ways. His isolation from the settler community, and even from his wife, speaks of a social fragmentation that is divorced from the *Unhu* principles of shared responsibility and collective well-being. His persistent financial challenges also mean he cannot balance his ecofriendliness with productivity, which is inconsistent with *Unhu*'s emphasis on sustainable livelihood and community empowerment. *The Grass is Singing* gives substantial narrative space to Dick's lack of farming expertise, reflected by a succession of failed farming projects that include prematurely neglected attempts at rearing pigs, turkeys, and rabbits and a ridiculous attempt to do bee farming based on a 'pamphlet [that] was written for English conditions' (103). This scenario partly reflects Dick's ineffectiveness and 'ecoambigious character' (Iheka 2018, 667), casting aspersions on the viability of his ecological disposition as an alternative to Slatter's unsustainable farming practices. Therefore, despite his environmentally friendly behaviour, Dick may be seen as a metonym for failed idealism.

Albeit implicitly, *The Grass is Singing* evokes the indigenous belief in the sacredness of the land as the abode of ancestral spirits. Magosvongwe notes that the Shona religio-cultural concept of *Unhu* is rooted in spirituality and a traditional justice system that uses taboos to regulate human behaviour towards all other life forms. In this scheme, the land is 'a living force' that 'inscribes checks and balances that govern ecological awareness and environmental conduct' (Magosvongwe 2016, 160). Therefore, indigenous ecological thinking is partly driven by the living's fear of retribution from their ancestors (Taringa 2006, 205). Lessing's novel alludes to the effectiveness of pre-colonial indigenous ecological practices by referring to how Slatter's farm used to have 'acres of good dark earth [now] gone dead from misuse' (98), and how indigenous forests existed on Dick's land 'years before he bought the farm, [and before] some mining company had cut out every tree on the place, leaving nothing but coarse scrub and wastes of grass' (105). In this way, colonialism disrupted pre-colonial environmental conservation practices.

However, *The Grass is Singing* symbolically highlights nature's vengeance against the disrespect of white settlers towards local conservation epistemologies, implied through motific references to natural challenges such as protracted drought spells, unbearably hot weather, and the prevalence of malaria. In the Shona belief system, ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) can punish the living if the latter deviates from cultural norms by causing illness and natural disasters like drought. Through motifs of arid, desolate, and unproductive landscapes with stunted and sparse shrubs, *The Grass is Singing* reveals what happens when society deviates from the ethical custodianship of nature. Nature's revenge against the inhuman treatment of indigenous people by Europeans and the exploitation of nature is also symbolically shown through Mary's unending misery, psychological breakdown, and eventual death. The ultimate triumph of nature is encapsulated by the visual imagery of the bush engulfing Dick's house (242), with the unstoppable bush symbolising the force and resilience of nature. Thus, through symbolism, Lessing calls for the respect of indigenous ecological sensibilities, resonating, elsewhere, with how Barry Lopez deploys narrative empathy, ethical reflection, and ecological detail to underscore the importance

of indigenous knowledge and experiences in providing lasting remedies to the environmental challenges the world is currently facing (Fincham 2024).

Alongside the issue of ecological injustice, Lessing also provides insight into the dynamics of gender inequality within an androcentric white Rhodesian society, primarily through the trope of troubled marital relationships. Mary and her mother are victims of gendered oppression as they are married to men with rigidly patriarchal mindsets. Mary's father is an irresponsible and abusive alcoholic, while Dick, albeit cunningly acquiescent, exhibits a chauvinistic mentality that does not regard Mary as an equal. Critics who have read *The Grass is Singing* from an eco-feminist perspective have largely focused on how the novel simultaneously calls for ecological justice and gender equality. We propose that it might be more theoretically enriching to think of African ecofeminist consciousness as an expression of *Unhu*. Although African eco-feminism primarily seeks justice for women and nature, connected through their shared subjection to male-authored domination and exploitation (Tamale 2020), *Unhu* offers a broader theoretical framework as it incorporates justice for nature and all forms of life. Lessing shows that both men and women can be victims of oppression and that pursuing social and ecological justice requires mutual respect and collective responsibility, which are some of the foundational tenets of *Unhu*.

Furthermore, Mary's embodiment of the complex dynamics of power, privilege, and disempowerment implies that even women need to embrace the *Unhu* values despite their predominantly disadvantaged position in patriarchal society. While feminist discourses generally agitate for the liberation and empowerment of women, they do not usually focus on how women ultimately benefit from embracing the *Unhu* principles of empathy, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. By emphasising social cohesion and reciprocity, *Unhu* deconstructs the common conflation of the male gender with power and privilege, conceptualised as the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell 1995, 79). The situation of the black farm workers in *The Grass is Singing* attests to this. Therefore, although gendered oppression, unsustainable land use, and racial prejudice are all injustices that can be addressed within the purview of African eco-feminism, the novel also implicitly suggests that the ultimate remedy lies in the restoration of the ethics of *Unhu*. This means that the liberatory power of eco-feminism can be enhanced by deploying it within the more holistic and inclusive *Unhu* framework. This broader framing aligns with Tamale's contention that African ecofeminism draws considerably from indigenous ontologies and knowledge systems (2020, 53).

Unhu and feminist (eco)care in *Ndima Ndima*

Ndima Ndima is thematically broad, with ecological concerns blending with home-building issues, the struggle for survival, women's sexuality, girlhood, love, war, death, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. The novel has not yet received much critical attention except for fragmented reviews from sites such as Goodreads, the Washington Independent Review of Books, and the Aotearoa New Zealand Review of Books. A more comprehensive review from Mangena (2024) highlights the novel's preoccupation with ecological concerns and the strained relationship between humans and the natural environment. Mangena notes that the novel is preoccupied with the ambivalent relationship between humans and nature. This is pertinent to the present study, which goes further to explore the treatment of the intersections of *Unhu* and African eco-feminism.

The setting is a significant aspect of the narrative in *Ndima Ndima*. While *The Grass is Singing* explores ecological concerns within a colonial agrarian setting, *Ndima Ndima* is set in a postcolonial urban context. Juxtaposing the two novels allows one to unravel (dis)continuities in

human attitudes towards the natural environment from the colonial era. The postcolonial setting of *Ndima Ndima* lends nuance to the novel's treatment of ecological issues as they are explored against the backdrop of enduring colonial hegemonies and spatial relations. Urban space in postcolonial Africa has been associated with capitalist greed and weakening social and physical infrastructures due primarily to the failure of metropolitan authorities to cope with rapid population growth (Myers and Murray 2006). The resultant strain on resources and social amenities often leads to urban marginality and unethical practices, as depicted in literary works such as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2011), Petina Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). It is fascinating, therefore, to explore how *Ndima Ndima* offers an ironic twist to expectations by depicting urban space as a site for the flourishing of the *Unhu* ethics of care and sustainable resource utilisation, and for the performance of indigenous ecological rituals. A visible aspect of the location inhabited by the Taha family is the rich red soil that attracts farming and, therefore, offers an entry point into a discussion of urban land use.

Ndima Ndima is a site of ambivalence, with eco-friendly behaviours juxtaposed with practices that threaten biodiversity. The latter includes deforestation, as urban residents clear land for settlement and small-scale farming, and Zuva's use of boiling water to kill snakes (4). Although snake killing is depicted as a safety measure, it reflects a confrontational and anthropocentric approach to risk management that 'allocates ethical consideration only to the human species,' to borrow from Kopnina and Washington (2019, 6). Man-made landmarks such as the Duva Dam, railway lines, bridges, and the many high-density suburbs such as Southgate 1 and Majuba that sprouted in the first decade of Zimbabwean independence are, therefore, a spatial reality that signals the disruption of natural ecosystems. These indices of anthropocentrism stand in sharp contrast to the pristine pre-urbanisation order where 'birds chirped in the scattered trees, bees buzzed, and hares, and rock dassies ran to hide from the eagles and snakes' (1). However, Mapepa also shows that the ecological situation in *Ndima Ndima* is not beyond redemption. We are told that even after people had settled on the land, 'trees were scattered here and there, nesting birds and other animals, and granite and igneous rocks spotted the landscape' (5). The residents are conscious of the need to balance livelihood with environmental awareness, which is the essence of ecological sustainability.

In several ways, *Ndima Ndima* underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge in promoting ethical environmental stewardship. The chapter 'The Call of Ancestors' highlights the Shona people's spiritual connection to the land and how their ecological philosophy is partly rooted in the fear of incurring the wrath of their ancestors (see Taringa 2006, 205). The 'Ndima Ndima' rainmaking ritual, for example, is a communal approach to resolving an environmental crisis (drought) whose cause is believed to be spiritual. The rainmaking ceremony is also an ethical approach to environmental stewardship, as it is performed to save both humans and non-humans from drought. The existence of spiritual symbols in the city (such as the Msasa tree where the Ndima Ndima dance is performed) underlines the adaptability of indigenous ecological knowledge to all environments. In this way, the novel unsettles the conflation of urbanisation with cultural death (Chan 2018) by imbuing the city space with spiritual significance and eco-friendliness.

The role of the supernatural world in fostering ecological sustainability is also evident in the depiction of the Yeredzo River. The river has a self-preservation mechanism in the form of a guardian spirit (Selina) who, according to village myth, inherited the special role from her mother, Heroshina (108). Selina's stewardship of the river entails imposing non-negotiable dictums against

acts that disregard her authority or pollute the river. Any blatant violation of her injunctions is severely punished, as attested by the disappearance of a boy (Munya) who defiantly dives into a forbidden section of the river (118). The instant vengeance here reveals the grave consequences of breaking taboos associated with the natural environment in Africa (Mawere 2014, 16; Taringa 2006, 205). The incident challenges Western rational scepticism and asserts the place of the supernatural realm in indigenous environmentalism. It also blurs the line between myth and reality, challenging the prejudicial framing of African epistemologies as rooted in myths in colonial discourses.

The primacy of indigenous spirituality in African ecological thinking is further reflected in the status of the Yeredzo River as a legal person with full rights enshrined in statutes transmitted intergenerationally. These statutes are enforceable by the chief and a council of elders, who hold weekly meetings 'to inform visitors about Selina's dwelling' (112). The notion of rivers, mountains, forests, and other natural entities as legal persons is an aspect of several indigenous cultures worldwide. By way of illustration, in 2017, the New Zealand Government conferred the 'legal person' status to the Whanganui River in recognition of the belief system of the Māori people, who consider the river as their living ancestor (Strang 2019, 105). In 2014, New Zealand granted legal personhood to Te Urewera Forest as a way of resolving a conflict with the Tuhoe Iwi people, who were fighting to restore their traditional custodianship of the forest (Kauffman 2020, 578). In Zimbabwe, the Jiri Forest under Chief Norumedzo in Bikita receives a similar status from the surrounding villages that consider it a sacred habitat for the edible *Harurwa* insect. These examples authenticate Mapepa's depiction of the Yeredzo River, underline the resilience of traditional environmental knowledge in the face of epistemic injustice. This spiritual ecology stands in contrast to Western rationalism, redeems indigenous ecological thought, and reinforces Tamale's (2020, 53) claim that African eco-feminism is rooted in indigenous epistemologies.

The eco-feminist dimension of *Ndima Ndima* is accentuated by how the novel projects ecological consciousness as a feminine sensibility, with female characters portrayed as environmental stewards and fountains of cultural knowledge. The focal point of this sensibility is Zuva, whose multifaceted roles as church leader, traditional chief (*mambokadzi*), rainmaker, and peacemaker earn her the prestigious title of 'mother of the nation' (68, 194). The English equivalent for Zuva's name is 'Sun', which further emphasises her greatness and importance, as the Sun is not only the most prominent star in the solar system but also the lifeblood of all fauna and flora. Zuva's environmental custodianship is encapsulated in her declaration that 'It is my duty to protect every creature and this land' (124). This is also in keeping with her traditional role as a chief, as in Shona cosmology, the chief assumes custodianship of the land on behalf of the ancestors (Magosvongwe 2016, 160). Zuva's eco-philosophy is based on her recognition of the symbiosis of all lives, which, in the words of Wienhues, calls 'for the expansion of moral considerability beyond the human realm' (6). This philosophy speaks through her rejection of the advice of Snake Park officers to burn the entire bush to eradicate snakes (24), and through her disappointment when her brother Garikai erects an electric fence to keep out the baboons and monkeys that previously relied on the fruits and maize from his parents' homestead (82). Zuva's ecological thinking challenges what Tamale regards as Western dualistic logic that privileges human interests over those of non-humans (52).

Nyeredzi is also integral to the novel's ecological concerns. The shared ecological sensibility between mother and daughter is reflected onomastically, since Nyeredzi means a 'star', while Zuva is the supreme star of the solar system. The following passage summarizes Nyeredzi's love for nature:

> The energy she got whenever she stepped into the bush was something special–the connection between her and this land was magnetic. She was drawn to the tiny hills that frothed termites–large and small balanced rocks–trees that danced to the whistles of the ancestors–animals that spoke in different languages while they bathed in the warm sun. It was as if the land was communicating with her, signaling what it had sucked, what it had devoured, and what it had birthed. (9–10)

Given that Nyeredzi is only seven years old at the time in question, she displays a precocious ecological consciousness that stands in contrast to the eco-unfriendly behaviour of some adults, such as her uncle Garikai. Later, as a grown-up young woman, Nyeredzi shares fruits with baboons in a symbolic gesture of interspecies harmony (232).

Another important female character in the novel is Mrs Kaundi, an old village widow. Like Zuva and Nyeredzi, she espouses an eco-philosophy that sees humans, animals, and inanimate objects as interconnected. Mrs Kaundi's homestead can be seen as a miniature nature sanctuary, with its various tree species providing food to wild animals. She does not have the paraphernalia generally associated with modern life, as she uses clay pots, keeps robes made of animal skins, and prefers to fetch water from the Yeredzo River despite having a borehole drilled by Zuva in her compound. Her preference for an indigenous lifestyle reflects her intimate knowledge of and respect for nature. Mrs Kaundi's eco-consciousness is reflected, among other ways, in the way she only chops dry wood from dead trees for firewood (217–230) to save trees.

Nyeredzi's brief stay with Mrs. Kaundi is an important phase of her moral and cognitive development. Her grooming under the tutelage of an old woman reflects the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge among the Shona people. How the three generations of women are linked through Mrs Kaundi, Zuva, and Nyeredzi evokes the concept of the 'matriarchive,' which Phalafala (2020) defines as a repository of cultural wisdom transmitted along matrilineal lines. In *Ndima Ndima*, the matriarchive is presented as vital to the struggle for ecological justice as women become important conduits for the transmission and preservation of traditional environmental knowledge. By placing them at the forefront of traditional environmental stewardship, the novel becomes a site for consolidating female subjectivities and a gynocentric and non-anthropocentric conception of ecological justice.

Although *Ndima Ndima* portrays men as less attuned to ecological issues, it calls for intergender solidarities in addressing ecological crises. The rainmaking ceremony, for instance, brings men and women together, underlining the power of a unified approach. Men's complementary roles are symbolically reflected by the astronomical significance of the names Zuva, Nyeredzi, and Mwedzi. The Sun (Zuva) is the most vital support system for all earthly lives, corresponding to women's leading contribution to ecological justice. The Star (Nyeredzi) draws her radiance from the Sun, reflecting how Zuva transmits ecological wisdom to her daughter. The Moon (Mwedzi) does not produce light but reflects the Sun's radiance, which translates to Mwedzi's role as a loving and supportive male figure. Therefore, the combination of Zuva and Mwedzi transcends the usual gender polarisation that Mrs Kaundi sarcastically hints at when she says, 'It's a miracle they met, especially with their names,' adding that 'when the sun and moon meet, they call it a solar eclipse.' However, Mrs Kaundi notes that instead of producing darkness, the meeting of Zuva and Mwedzi created a 'ring of fire to bear a star' (228). The extended metaphor captures the important role that men can play towards the achievement of social and ecological justice. It also suggests that Mapepa's eco-feminist consciousness draws on the *Unhu* principles of gender complementarity and cosmic interconnectedness.

Overall, *Ndima Ndima* offers a nuanced depiction of human-nature relationships. The ecofeminist underpinnings of the novel speak through the way women are given more narrative space and depicted as primary custodians of ecological knowledge. However, the novel also highlights the indispensable contribution that men make to ecological justice. Therefore, it depicts the roles of men and women as complementary and gestures at the beauty of collective responsibility. This integration of *Unhu* and eco-feminist consciousness enables the novel to pursue social and ecological justice simultaneously. What is disturbing is that, towards the end, the novel hints at the threat of modernity and neoliberalism to traditional practices. The narrator alludes, in this regard, to how there was now a school 'close to the Msasa tree, where the whole community once gathered to perform a traditional rain dance' (245). This symbolic development highlights the odds against an *Unhu* based environmental conservation ethic in the age of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism (Taringa 2006).

Conclusion

Through a comparative close reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Tsitsi Mapepa's *Ndima Ndima*, the study has underscored the role of African literary imagination in challenging anthropocentrism and re-grounding indigenous epistemologies. Situating the discussion at the confluence of African eco-feminism and African philosophy, the study has provided a context-specific exploration of the capacity of *Unhu* ethics to inspire ecological sustainability. The texts studied invoke the *Unhu* principles of respect for nature, compassion, shared responsibility, and community empowerment to call for social justice and ethical environmental stewardship. In the process, the texts underline the resilience of traditional knowledge and belief systems in the face of modernity and epistemic injustice and call for ecological thinking that recognises the symbiosis between humans and non-humans.

The study has innovatively deployed *Unhu* and African eco-feminism to underscore the causal relationship between ethical human behaviour and ecological justice, and offer a nuanced critique of anthropocentrism and masculinism. In light of this methodological choice, we have argued, first, that it is theoretically enriching to place African eco-feminism within the holistic and multi-inclusive *Unhu* framework since this theoretical integration aligns with increasing calls for multi-modal and relational approaches to the issue of environmental justice. Secondly, we have suggested that African eco-feminist consciousness is an expression and performance of *Unhu* as it draws on indigenous epistemologies. Finally, we hope that the insights unravelled by this study prove relevant as Africa and the rest of the world grapple with climate change and other ecological crises. As the texts studied suggest, the ultimate remedy lies in synergistic approaches rooted in ethics, where every human being assumes moral responsibility over fellow humans and other elements of the biosphere.

Notes

1. The term "extractivism" first came into use in the 1970s in mining and oil industry contexts. It connotes ruthless profiteering and insensitivity to the risks and harms to the environment or people. See Varma, R. Sreejith. Resource Extractivism and Environmental Damage: An Analysis of Two Extractivist Fictions from Kerala," p. 657.

2. The African relational philosophy is known by different names in different African languages, such as "Ubuntu" in isiZulu, isiNdebele, and Kinyarwanda; "Utu" or "Obuntu" in Swahili; "Botho" in Setswana; "Kimuntu" or "Gimuntu" in Kongo, and "Obuuntu" in Luganda.

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