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Stuck between Mother Earth and a mother's womb? On women, population policy and ecological sustainable development

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This article considers how the metaphor of Mother Earth, for women, concerns a dual stance of both belonging and distance. The link between women, nature and Mother Earth is problematised by considering the possible, or contested, link between population growth and climate change, and the South African population policy specifically is considered as an example. Ecofeminism's challenge to the perceived connection between women, motherhood and Earth, that is the 'distance' stance, is considered and a response to that is offered by reflecting on Mercy Oduyoye's notion of mothering, which represents the 'belonging' stance. In this regard, an intercultural approach to the definition of motherhood is implied. It is ultimately indicated that for women to reclaim their own agency regarding a perceived responsibility towards nature, it is necessary to deconstruct and reconstruct 'motherhood' to free themselves from being stuck between Mother Earth and a mother's womb.

Contribution: This article makes a contribution to feminist studies at the intersection of gender roles and the climate crisis, as it relates to population growth and an intercultural definition of motherhood. It contributes to UN's sustainable development agenda as it relates to both SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 13 (climate action).

Keywords: Mother Earth; motherhood; mothering; women; nature; population; environment; climate; South Africa; sustainable development.

In honour of Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–2022), for gifting women the language of redemption and the redemption of language.[1]

Introduction[2]: There is a problem at 'Mother's'

Although governments across the world are debating about how to react to it – be it policy interventions, green initiatives, more travelling to foreign countries for debates or fear of the loss of income (Hales & Mackey 2021) – no one can dispute it anymore: Mother Earth is in deep trouble. There is an escalating climate crisis because of imbalances in Earth's natural environment. This is evidenced by the 2020 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) titled, 'Climate Change and Land'. The report indicates an increase in land degradation, leading to increasing drought and desertification (IPCC 2020:7). This includes increased heatwaves and dust storms (IPCC 2020:9). Land degradation is also exacerbated by an increase in rainfall intensity, leading to floods (IPCC 2020:10). This, in turn, has an impact on food security. The relationship between people and land is important, because, '[L]and provides the principal basis for human livelihoods and well-being including the supply of food, freshwater and multiple other ecosystem services, as well as biodiversity. Human use directly affects more than 70% (likely 69% – 76%) of the global, ice-free land surface (high confidence). Land also plays an important role in the climate system' (IPCC 2020:7).

1.The influence of Rosemary Radford Ruether extends beyond the borders of her native country, the United States of America. Turn to the index in any existing work today on women's theology, ecofeminism, feminist theology or theologies of family or bodies, and one will find her name referenced there. She is found in the *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (McClintock Fulkerson & Briggs 2012), in Kwok Pui-lan's (2005) ground-breaking *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, and she is also found in Africa – in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology* (eds. Chisale & Robson Bosch 2021). Rosemary Radford Ruether's influence will however extend over time too, as subsequent generations critically engage with her work. This contribution is an expression of Radford Ruether's (2013) feminist theological enterprise of the deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts and frameworks for theology, as within this contribution a simultaneous stance of 'distance' and 'belonging' related to 'motherhood' is articulated.

2.This contribution is a reworked version of a keynote presentation at the conference, Cosmology and Community, at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, July 2019, titled, 'Examining South-African population policy at the intersection of the sustainable development goals of gender equality and climate action: Perspectives from ecofeminist theology'.

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Called 'Mother Earth', the planet is imagined as a female parent, because of the way that planet Earth's biological ability to bring forth, develop and sustain is equated with the biological weaving-creating and nurturing-sustaining of a women-parent. In this way, the planet (a mass of gas, rock, minerals) is awarded the status of having a womb, or being one (Musili 2021:99–115; Njoroge 2021:xxvii; Chisale & Robson Bosch 2021:19–24), and a link is established between nature (Earth) and women (mother). This metaphorical status of the planet was reflected and reinforced by ancient cosmogonies, in which creation stories revolved around the power of life and creation, wielded by female goddesses, or mother-goddesses who were portrayed as the consort or wife of male deities (see Baard 2019:94–95, 18; Lerner 1986; Radford Ruether 2012).[3] Images and metaphors for the earth as mother are plentiful in indigenous societies across the world (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:52–53). There are strands within Jewish tradition and Christian theology (among others) that identify God as mother or midwife (see Claassens 2012; Grey 2001:24–26) and make reference to God's womb as living space for creation (Conradie 2009:230–240; McFague 1987; cf. Marais 2019:16–17). There is also one other notable link between humanity, land (Earth) and motherhood, and that is the way that humanity sometimes refer to their geographic points of origin, their 'home country' as 'Motherland'. This is a political distinction, related to the notion of 'nation', which is rooted in the words *natio* (tribe) and *natus* (born) (Mies & Shiva 2014:124–125).

This metaphorical connection between women-parenthood, nature and the Earth has divergent outcomes. Although it can be a symbol of strength, healing and comfort (Grey 2001:26), 'motherhood' is also riddled with complexities and challenges. Motherhood is an honour and a shame. It is appreciated as a high status and disregarded as a low status.[4] This is illustrated by a socioreligious culture that creates and sustains motherhood as the essential trait of a woman, because women who do not have children[5] are constantly badgered about their choices (Rutoro & Madimbo 2015:325–342),[6] or pitied when they are not able to (Van Wyk 2019). The very same socioreligious culture punishes women

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[3].The female goddesses were later 'dethroned', following the establishment of an imperialistic governance structure – a patriarchal and hierarchical system of kingship that saw the emergence of dominant male gods and creation stores that depicted the hierarchical social order as a reflection of the cosmic order (Radford Ruether 2012:23). In these narratives, the functions of fertility were split into functions of sexuality and procreation and there emerged different goddesses within the creation narratives assigned to each function (Lerner 1986:9). Creation was now only possible through mating, and the mother-goddesses became the wife or consort of the main male deity.

[4].Women's authority, power, visibility and participation in history have been linked to motherhood, as the feminist historian Gerda Lerner (1986, 1993) has pointed out in two studies that took her two decades to complete. Motherhood was regarded as one of the ways in which women could be 'unhidden' from the very history they were active in creating, and one of the ways they could gain access to God, namely by fulfilling their maternal and nurturing roles. The positive translation of this was that women redirected this designation by reclaiming specialised and embodied knowledge. They utilised the 'special role' of motherhood to subvert patriarchal ideas, and to gain entry into public (and sacred) spaces from which they were excluded. However, as Lerner (1993:275) points out, a patriarchal glorification of motherhood leads to the glorification of women's domestic role – making it women's responsibility to care for and nurture everything under the sun. This was the negative translation of the emphasis on motherhood.

[5].'Having children' in this regard includes adoption.

[6].This is also clear in the distinction made in the United States abortion debate, namely, 'pro-choice' and 'pro-life', which in essence makes a reductionist distinction between women that choose themselves and women that cherish life in its entirety.

for having children. This happens when all domestic and childrearing responsibilities fall on them (Mwaniki & Mouton 2015:344–348), a responsibility for which they are penalised by not being able to cultivate life outside their preconceived roles, taking less-earning income jobs, or when they have to juggle work and home, in way that is tantamount to abuse – which has been the case during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Breastfeeding mothers often face public outcry because they dare feed their babies in public. Therefore, the persistent link between woman and the environment in climate change and sustainable development agendas (Foster 2015:62–73; Resurreccion 2013:33–43), has left both women and Mother Earth between the proverbial rock and a hard place, because human mothers and Mother Earth are both rewarded and punished for being 'mothers', while it is seemingly women's responsibility to solve the problem at 'Mother's' (Mother Earth).

This article will consider how the metaphor of Mother Earth, for women, concerns a dual stance of both distance and belonging. The link between women, nature and Mother Earth is first of all problematised by considering the possible, or contested, link between population growth and climate change, and then the South African population policy specifically is considered as an example, as other population policies have been considered elsewhere (Van Wyk 2019). The reason for the South African focus is two-fold. I am a South African woman, a single woman of a single mother, and I was raised in the socioreligious cultural setting described earlier and I experience its effects – daily. My country has also not been spared the effects of climate change, as many of its provinces experience prolonged periods of drought and intermittent heavy rainfall and flooding. I am a white woman – and in this regard I acknowledge and realise that my education's Western philosophical character and my historical position of privilege in this country also had an influence on my experience of, and my stance toward, motherhood. In this regard, the feminist and gender-sensitive methodology of positionality (cf. Letherby 2015:76–90) is pivotal to this contribution, and it is why – after a reflection on ecofeminism's challenge to the perceived connection between women, motherhood and Earth – the 'distance' stance, a response to that is offered by reflecting on Mercy Oduyoye's notion of mothering, which represents the 'belonging' stance.

Linking sustainable development (and climate action) to population: Does it matter?

Between 1960 and 2000, the world's population grew by 100.2%, from around 3 billion to over 6 billion. By 2012, the world's population grew to over 7 billion, which meant that the growth rate had declined, but the world's population was still becoming ever larger. This is not only because of the number of births per woman worldwide, but it is also because of life expectancy increasing from 51.1 to 69.9 years and infant mortality rates (number of infants dying before the age

of 1 year) which decreased from 12% to 3.5%. Population growth can therefore partly be attributed to a longer average life expectancy and a lower infant mortality rate (Weeks 2005). The UN's median population projections are for a 3.1-billion increase from 2012 to a peak population of about 10.1 billion by 2100 (Bergaglio 2017:2024; Pearson 2015:139).

The carrying capacity of the biosphere or an ecosystem is related to the number of organisms that can be sustained. If population exceeds the carrying capacity for any one of these conditions, the phenomenon of overpopulation occurs (Weeks 2005:518). 'Environmental degradation' is the combined result of population growth, the growth in production in aid of economic development (this is the transformation of products of the natural environment for human use) and the technology applied to that transformation process (Weeks 2005:524). This is commonly known as the impact, population, affluence and technology [IPAT][7] equation (Bergaglio 2017:2025). Technological improvements might work to counteract the impact of consumption on the degradation of the environment; however, population size keeps on exerting upwards pressure on degradation.

Bergaglio (2017:2024–2026) confirms that a correlation between population growth, increased pressure on resources and the degradation of the environment has existed for some time. Charles Pearson too (2015:135) acknowledges that population plays a central role in carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions. However, this correlation has not always been recognised explicitly in policy about abatement strategies with regard to CO2 emissions[8] and there have been vague acknowledgments of the relationship between climate problems and population, mostly confined to technical variables. The main emphasis of climate policy has been on technological solutions and market-friendly abatement tools like carbon taxes and trade schemes (Pearson 2015:135).

However, this has recently started to change. The IPCC 2018 Summary for Policymakers (SPM) indicated a link between the climate crisis and population growth (2018:6, 14). This is also indicated in the IPCC 2020 SPM, which links people and land (population growth) to climate change.[9] Because of the importance of this link for this article, the statement in the SPM is quoted in full:

> Data available since 1961 show that global population growth and changes in per capita consumption of food, feed, fibre, timber and energy have caused unprecedented rates of land and freshwater use (very high confidence) with agriculture currently accounting for ca. 70% of global fresh-water use

(medium confidence). Expansion of areas under agriculture and forestry, including commercial production, and enhanced agriculture and forestry productivity have supported consumption and food availability for a growing population (high confidence). With large regional variation, these changes have contributed to increasing net GHG emissions (very high confidence), loss of natural ecosystems (e.g. forests, savannahs, natural grasslands and wetlands) and declining biodiversity (high confidence). (p. 7)

The impact of population on the environment is dependent on simultaneous factors: the total size of the population and the per capita consumption of resources, and the per capita production of waste (Bergaglio 2017:2032). Changes in the ecosystem and its capacity to react to degradation are determined by the size of the population, the choices humanity makes with regard to the environment and the way in which resources are used. Carrying capacity relates to the standard of living one is reasonably satisfied with. 'Population' can therefore be related to sustainable development, and it *matters:* it matters to the environment and it matters to those who are on the receiving end of an imbalance in resource use and distribution, which brings me to the matter of population policy. There are studies that have illustrated the importance of population and population policy to climate policy (Pearson 2015:126–145). One could say population policy *matters*. However, the main focus of population policies usually includes fertility rates and women's reproductive choices (Pearson 2015) and therefore population policies are closely linked in many ways to women's motherhood – and to Mother Earth, although it is not explicitly stated. Between women's natural biological ability to mother, and the expectation surrounding their special responsibility to be in tune with Mother Earth, thereby inadvertently being assigned to mother yet another 'being' – Earth, – what opportunities exist for women to be 'mothers' outside these two extremes? Or what are the chances for women to both acknowledge and distance themselves from, when necessary, this responsibility? These issues will be considered via the example of the South African population policy.

An overview of the South African population policy

The Population Policy of South Africa (PPSA) was adopted in 1998. The reorientation of the policy was prompted by the change in government in 1994. In the same year, the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) took place in Cairo, which provided perspectives that the policymakers wanted to incorporate. This policy would be the first PPSA that would not be about controlling the numbers of different races in South Africa (cf. Kuumba 1999).[10] Past policies focussed on fertility reduction, restricting population movement and controlling settlement patterns (PPSA 1998:viii), related to racial segregation.

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7. 'Impact' refers to the amount of a particular kind of environmental degradation; 'population' refers to the size of the population, 'affluence' refers to personal income and 'technology' refers to those properties of particular techniques through which food is produced, but which are harmful to the environment. However, technology may have a positive or negative influence.

8. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is arguably the world's main analytical tool for measuring climate change. Yet there are a few summaries for policymakers that do not include population policy in their suggestions for mitigation of emissions. The 2007 summary did not mention population policy. The 2014 IPCC working group draft on mitigation strategies acknowledged that economic and population growth will be the most important drivers of CO_2 emissions, but no analysis or recommendations were presented.

9. At the time of writing this article, the latest IPCC summary report for 2021 was not available yet.

10. Non-governmental organisations in South Africa existed which had interests in population issues (during the late 1970s to mid-1980s): Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa, Association for Voluntary Sterilisation of South Africa and Zero Population Growth (cf. Chimere-Dan 1993).

The stated aim of the policy is to influence the country's population trends in a way that is consistent with the achievement of human sustainable development (PPSA 1998:i). The policy is divided into two sections: one describing the current situation and the other outlining strategies and goals. With regard to the situation of women, broadly summarised, the situation analysis revealed (PPSA 1998:12) the following:

- Women are by far worse off than men; black women more so.
- There is a gap in the distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, severely impacting women.
- Women have less access to education; when they do, there is a high drop-out rate because of teenage pregnancies.
- Women are under-represented in the decision-making structure of the government and the private sector.
- Women cannot as a rule take advantage of life enhancing opportunities such as politics, education, community involvement or leisure, because of their heavy domestic and work burden.
- Administrative and cultural practices discriminate against women.
- Women are far more likely to use contraceptive methods than men.
- Single-parent female-headed households are increasing in areas with high male absenteeism.
- The responsibility for family planning tends to be relegated to women.

With regard to the environment, broadly, from the policy, the following can be summarised:

- There is a gap in the distribution of resources between urban and rural areas; rural areas being hit the hardest and consequently having a larger impact on the environment.
- There is a reciprocal relationship between population, development and the environment (PPSA 1998:viii).
- There are concerns over the pressure of the interaction of population, production and consumption patterns on the environment.

As it is a population policy, it places a rather large emphasis on fertility and mortality (together with family planning), although it is specifically stated that the policy focuses on more than fertility trends and fertility control (PPSA 1998:ii). 'Population' is identified as a key aspect in the socio-economic development strategy of the country (PPSA 1998:viii). It is necessary to make a brief remark about the policy's paradigm towards the notion of development, because population policies have the tendency to be hijacked by how population could contribute to economic development or hinder it, thereby making it solely about money and power (Kantner & Kantner 2006:x; Kuumba 1999). The policy has a brief section outlining its definition of 'development'. It is stated that 'development' does not imply 'economic development' only (PPSA 1998:47). It is not about an increase in productivity and per capita output. The policy opts for the notion of 'human development', which includes both social and economic development. Human development as a concept accepts that human capital has a central role in enhancing human productivity, but in essence, human development is about enlarging people's choices.[11]

Gender equality (equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men) and gender equity (the fair and just distribution of opportunities and resources between women and men), together with empowerment, is high on the agenda of the policy. These three are stated as the cornerstones of sustainable development (PPSA 1998:8).

The final section of the policy outlines strategies. Environmental sustainability and gender equity, equality and empowerment of women are stated among the 24 strategies. The strategy with regard to the environment is rather vague, stating that the relationship between population, production and consumption needs to be studied (PPSA 1998:38). 'Population' is not explicitly linked to 'climate', which does not feature in the policy at all. With regard to women, it is stated that there should be 'advocating and facilitating' measures to enable and ensure that all forms of discrimination and disparities based on gender are eliminated, that there is more effective implementation of laws that protect women's rights and that women should be represented in decision-making bodies through affirmative action (PPSA 1998:39).

Implementation and progress of the policy

The implementation of the policy belonged to a cooperation between the government, private sectors and civil society (PPSA 1998:41). One of the objectives of the policy was to create awareness about the reciprocal relationship between population, development and environment among community and family levels in South Africa, as it is within the community and the family contexts that underlying power-relations operate, which influence decision-making about the distribution of resources (PPSA 1998:1). It was certainly a progressive policy for its time. However, it did not explicitly link population to climate action and it did not contribute to breaking down binary gender roles which are culturally and socially entrenched. The result of this is indicated in the progress report on the implementation of the policy that was published in 2010. It was reported that the South African population grew, although the growth rate was declining. Although the country had developed economically, poverty among women and female-headed households did not decrease. Despite an improvement in women's access to political power and decision-making structures, women continue to be 'disproportionally burdened by poverty, socio-economic inequality and gender-based violence' (Department of Social Development 2010:11). Low representation of women in the private sector remains.

11. These choices include 'choices for people to lead a healthy life, to acquire knowledge, and to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political, economic and social freedom to make use of opportunities for being creative and productive, and to enjoy personal self-respect and guaranteed human rights' (PPSA 1998:47).

Women remain under-represented in the fields of science, technology and engineering despite obtaining 60% of university qualifications. There are also persistent inequalities with regard to sexual and reproductive relations. Human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome affect women disproportionally more than men, highlighting unequal power relations. With regard to the environment, it is reported that economic development, with improved quality of life for an 'ever-increasing number of people' (Department of Social Development 2010:11), had come at a cost for the environment. The progress report explicitly links population to climate problems and the increasing emissions, which the original policy did not. Increasing CO_2 emissions are linked to a growth in population (albeit at a slower rate) and more specifically to an increase in households. South Africa has a relatively youthful population, and is likely to be a catalyst for increased household formation, consumption of resources and waste (Department of Social Development 2010:43).

Conclusions about the policy

With the South African population policy's emphasis on gender equality and women's reproductive choices, the possibility existed that the policy would not link women solely to motherhood, and a specific understanding thereof. However, in the policy, that is exactly what is expressed, as it is indicated that population growth and population (family) planning are linked to women. The policy both sustains and problematises an assumed link between women and nature, as population growth is linked to the overburdening of the environment, and population growth is, seemingly, in the hands of women, as it relates to fertility and reproductive health. This means a population policy like this leaves a woman between a rock and a hard place, between Mother Earth and a mother's womb. There is literally no place to go. In this regard, does a population policy like this help or hinder environmental sustainable development agendas? Does it do anything but usher women into a house from which there is no escape? And is 'motherhood' only to be understood as the sole responsibility of a proverbial overburdened ecological office manager? It is to these questions that I turn to, as I attempt to envisage 'motherhood' as a relationship of both distance and belonging – something, which given the climate crisis, policymakers should pay attention to.

Distancing oneself from the link between women and nature: The great ecofeminist debate

There is a long-standing debate with regard to the assumed relationship between women and nature. On the one hand, there is a characterisation of men's and women's roles and relationship to nature based on supposedly intrinsic masculine and feminine characteristics. On the other hand, there is a focus on gendered social relations and the complexity of people's gendered identities (Terry 2009:7).

Traditionally, ecofeminism, ecofeminist theology and ecofeminist postcolonial theology have made use of an assumed relationship between women and nature and nurture (designated the women–nature nexus; cf. Van Wyk 2019) in one of these ways. Since I started researching gender and feminist theory and theology a few years ago, I have had an ambivalent attitude toward ecofeminism due to this utilisation of the women-nature nexus.

Ecofeminism brings feminist scholarship into conversation with issues surrounding the environment, or ecology. It is a matrix which aims to expose the domination of women by men and the domination of the natural world by human beings (Rakoczy 2004:300). The notion of 'ecofeminism' was first used by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1972 in reference to the potential of women to bring about an ecological resolution to ensure human survival on the planet (Rakoczy 2004:301). Ecofeminists prefer the word 'ecology' above 'environment' when referencing their analysis of the degradation of the earth, because 'ecology' is a holistic description of the earth that a variety of life forms share (Clifford 2001:223).

From an intersectional perspective, women's experiences of the 'intricate oppressions' (Rakoczy 2004:303) of patriarchy are not the same. Intersectionality is a theory that acknowledges that multiple social identities and overlapping systems of domination and/or exclusion result in different experiences of advantage or disadvantage for women of different geographical locations and cultures. This acknowledges that while wealthy women dispose of their rubbish, poor women scavenge through this garbage in search of food for their children. Or, while privileged women go to a supermarket and buy out-of-season produce, those who picked that produce do not have money for bread or they are suffering from the pesticide poisoning. From this vantage point, 'ecofeminism' is about the acknowledgement that privilege comes with a price paid by the environment and by women in different parts of the world. It is about creating awareness about the intricacy of the oppression of women (Rakoczy 2004:304).

The most intricate theological issue in ecofeminism is the relationship between women and nature. Sue Rakoczy (2004) reiterates the reason for my mixed feelings toward ecofeminist theory and theology, precisely because of:

> [*H*]ow theological reflection walks a precarious balance in trying to find ways to speak of women's connection to the natural world that will affirm the truth of this link, without distorting it through dualism and hierarchy. (p. 304)

There is a clear tension between two views. One views the women–nature connection to be a social ideology, constructed by patriarchy to justify dominating women as nature is dominated (Radford Ruether 1996:30). The domination of women in this regard is based on a patriarchal philosophy that regards the 'mind' superior to 'nature' and because women are perceived to be closer to nature than men, women are inferior and subordinate to men (Pui-lan

2005:217). The other attempts to celebrate the identification of women with nature, employs 'mother-earth-language', emphasises nature-based religions and goddess spirituality and attempts to reclaim women's embodiment with regard to women's roles in earth-keeping and earth-saving (cf. Pui-lan 2005:214).

In my professional life as an academic, working within the field of Religion and Sustainable Development, and feminist theology, and as an ordained minister of an Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Church, I have struggled to identify with the second view in a positive way. Because I experience how women in my context are regarded as 'walking wombs', and although I may be naturally inclined toward mothering or nurturing, I have argued that this might not be true for all women, and that women's status should not be determined by it (Van Wyk 2019). The political philosopher Adam Swift (2014:113–115) argues that it is not really about biology. It is about culture, namely, the way society defines the role of a man or a woman, a mother or a father, which is really about gender as a social construct. I acknowledge that I could be saying this from a so-called Western perspective. And the reason I am saying it, is due to the hierarchical dualism which has shaped Christianity's view of women and nature. Rakoczy (2004:305) argues that hierarchical dualism (creating opposition and separation and assigning value to that separation) is the root cause of pejorative tensions between women and nature. Elizabeth Johnson (1993) has summarised the process of hierarchical dualism in the history of Christianity:

> humanity is detached from and more important than nature; man is separate from and more valuable than woman; God is disconnected from the world, utterly and simply transcendent over it, as well as more significant than it. (pp. 10–11)

Belonging: 'Mothering' as opposed to 'motherhood'

However, my perspective is not the only one. In the theology of Ghanaian (African) womanist theologian, Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye,[12] 'mothering' is considered both as a metaphor and as a sacred duty (Kotzé 2019). With regard to the theme of this article and my own particular suspicion toward the women-nature nexus, it is relevant to note that Oduyoye has written extensively on the notion of mothering – while not having children herself.

In her work, Oduyoye (2002:57–58) has made a distinction between 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. Motherhood is the biological act of bearing and raising children. Mothering is Oduyoye's vision of care for human beings, focused on the enhancement of life (Kotzé 2019; cf. Marais 2015:192). For Oduyoye, motherhood is not necessarily a religious duty. However, mothering is a religious duty. Mothering is what a (good) socio-political system should be about: if those who are entrusted to the care of the state are nurtured to care for

and take care of, themselves, one another and the environment (Oduyoye 2002:57). In this regard, mothering is not only applicable to biological mothers. Both women and men are called to the sacred duty of mothering.

Oduyoye was born into a matrilineal setting and married into a patrilineal culture, which was also patriarchal (Kotzé 2019). In the matrilineal culture, a person's status depends on their mother and if the firstborn of a family is a girl, there is the security that the family will continue. As her mother's firstborn child, Oduyoye cared as a 'second mother' for her brothers and sisters, while tending to the household. When someone would come to a person's house in need of assistance, they would take care of them – that is 'mothering'. In this regard, she is not a mother – but she has children (Oduyoye 2002:57). Mothering is the calling to live a 'life of letting go, a readiness to share resources and to receive with appreciation what others offer' (Oduyoye 2002:58). 'Mothering' is also the unwillingness to stand on the sidelines while people are mistreated and exploited (Kotzé 2019). Oduyoye has therefore strong theological accents in her work on the notion of God as Mother. The idea of God as Mother in creating space to live is a prominent theme in her theology (Kotzé 2019). Mothers in African communities are especially appreciated for the way they create and sustain homes. For Oduyoye (1995:142–143), the home is a metaphorical extension of the womb. Just like a mother creates room for a child, God creates room for humanity. There is an analogy between the creative work of the mother and the creative, inviting and inclusive work of God.

In her cultural setting, Oduyoye's theological and contextual 'deconstruction' of the biological role and gender-related cultural expectations hoisted on women as natural and biological caregivers is to be commended. She reconceives traditional concepts of marital relationships. For me, keeping my own positionality in mind, it is a serious reminder that although my context is as real and determinant as someone else's, it is not the only context – nor is it the only perspective. Oduyoye's work is remarkable, because in different sections of African culture, childlessness is considered as a bane to avoid at all cost (Oduyoye 2008:84). A wife is required to complement her husband's needs (Pui-lan 2004:14). There is a propensity for patriarchy in African societies (Zulu 2015:81) – but so too in the Afrikaans society I grew up in, as Christi van der Westhuizen has indicated in her work, *Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in Postapartheid South Africa* (2018). Women are regarded only insofar as they adhere to natural roles that nature has bestowed on them. For example, Ester Rutoro (2015:309–311), in her research on Shona culture (Zimbabwe), recounts how one of the respondents of her study was ostracised as a witch because her husband helped her with household chores, which meant that she had given him a concoction to make him a woman. As Rutoro and Madimbo (2015) state:

> For women, wifehood and motherhood contribute to how they are viewed in society, the roles they fulfil and the positions they are offered or the opportunities open to them in society. (p. 327)

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12. Mercy Oduyoye is often described as the 'mother' of African women's theologies (Phiri & Nadar 2006:10). She is currently the director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana.

Disregarding these natural and cultural roles leads to marginalisation and violence. Oduyoye managed to conceptualise and implement a dialectical understanding of 'motherhood': a woman's distance and belonging towards her so-called natural responsibility, thereby opening up the possibility of a more balanced responsibility towards Mother Earth.

Conclusion: A mother's agency? On distance and belonging once more

As I write this article, I cannot deny the potentiality of motherhood. As someone who has been raised in a one parent environment, I can attest to the incredible strength and steadfastness of a mother. Nature's ability and strength are certainly mirrored in a mother's actions. But there is the danger of the idealisation of motherhood. Population growth that may be linked to climate action and rising socio-economic gaps in populations across the world has meant that not all mothers are able to take care of their children. In societies where absent fathers is a common phenomenon, women take care of multiple generations. In this context, 'motherhood' is a pillar of strength to those generations, but it is certainly not to be romanticised. Instead of assigning binary roles to women, that end up hurting them, as well as the environment, a dialectic tension is proposed, in which women may approach their own ability to be mothers in revolving concentric circles, while their relationship to motherhood is recognised by themselves, and others, as a constant creative tension of distance and belonging. In this dynamic movement, roles may be assigned to different people (genders) at different times. And there is not only one definition of what it means to be a mother.

In her work on the ways that gender informs and affects world politics, Laura Shepard (2015:24–35) has illustrated that gender is not only a noun (identity) or a verb (action), it is also a logic, which is underpinned by an ontological assumption of the duality of gender: that humans come in either 'M' or 'F'. This essentialist or dimorphic (two categories based on physical forms) separation determines the way people think about any social or political aspects that have to do with the body, ranging from marriage ceremonies to the sports. Gender is utilised to 'humanise' individuals. It is performative (Butler 1993), that is, bodies take on gendered characteristics which are deemed appropriate for their 'sex' from birth and this gender is performed repeatedly. This means that for the sake of the recognition of one another, gender is performed within cultural and historical boundaries (Shepard 2015:32), for example, 'boys don't cry', and 'you throw like a girl'. And, as Judith Butler (1999:178) states, 'we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right'. Butler is concerned with how gender in this regard is used to 'dehumanise': 'how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human?…what are the means by which we transform it [delimiting power]?' (Butler 1999:xxii). Even though recent population policies are aimed at achieving gender equity and equality, they essentially maintain the type of *normative* gender (gender identities) and *performative* gender (gender roles) that Shepard and Butler refer to.

However, according to Geraldine Terry (2009:3), there is also a tendency to present women as victims only, without depicting them also as agents who are capable of contributing to solutions.

Terry acknowledges that the message of women's gendered vulnerability has not been heard in all countries and that it has to be communicated to policymakers. But what creates and sustains women's gendered vulnerability? Is it that poverty has been feminised or is it because of non-economic factors, such as cultural norms? It seems that policies created at the intersection of population, gender, development and the environment do not factor the 'cultural' aspect or the 'performative gender' aspect into the formulation of strategies. It comes down to women's agency: the roles they claim for themselves and the roles that are cast on them by others (cf. Swift 2014:110–115). To deconstruct and reconstruct 'motherhood' is to reclaim agency – and thereby women can free themselves from being stuck between Mother Earth and a mother's womb.

Acknowledgements

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