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## **Symbolic Representation of Nature and Women in Oromo Oral Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

The main objective of this study was to explore the link between the symbolization of nature and women in Oromo oral narratives. Its emphasis was on deciphering conceptual associations made between the two entities focusing on metaphors, motifs and discourses. To this end, folk-narratives were gathered from four different zones of Oromia national regional state through fieldwork. Besides, published oral narrative collections of the region are used as secondary data. Ecofeminism, the theoretical perspective that looks at the connection between conceptualizations of the physical environment and women, was employed in analyzing the narratives. The critical analysis conducted revealed that Oromo oral narratives are replete with natural images indicating the eco-centered nature of the narratives. Nature, in these narratives is depicted as a compassionate mother and an embodiment with symbolic capacity of speaking for itself. In depicting nature as an incarnate entity, the narratives present a discourse that challenges anthropocentric perspectives. Nature and women are symbolically linked on the grounds of fertility, survival values and natural psychological predisposition (sympathy). The narratives portray women as possessing qualities which attribute them to nature. They also conceptualize nature with the cultural feminine qualities. While women are portrayed as close to nature, the men that populate the narratives are depicted as distanced. The narratives present a good deal of resistance against symbolic associations targeted at dominion, but also appear to succumb to the same discourse they resist due to the twist at the end. Hence, the representations in the narratives are conflicted in the sense that both conforming and resistant perspectives are presented. This study selectively focused on the symbolic association in the representation of the two entities; hence, the researchers recommend a comprehensive and comparative further study on this and other genres of Oromo folk-literature..

**Keywords:** Oromo; narratives; ecofeminism; symbolic representation; nature; women.

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## **1. Introduction**

The accumulated experiences embedded in folklore can be instrumental in advancing human being's understanding of its multifarious relationships to the different human and nonhuman entities. Folklore is considered to be a source of human being's fundamental 'scientific' ideas [1, 2]. However, in a technologically complex and sophisticated world of today, folkloric perspectives and knowledge may appear slow on the uptake. Whatever the cover-up, it is patent that human kind's definition of self and beliefs are shaped by the symbols and codes inherent in folklore. Oral narratives, for instance, are one important means by which cultures capture their belief systems for themselves and their posterity. Therefore, the narratives can serve as vehicles by which a culture influences successive generations.

Currents of change (technological advances) have influenced humankind's perception of itself and its place in the natural world. Some scholars argue that the influence has gone to the extent of forming a gulf amongst human groups, and between human and nonhuman nature [3]. The propagation of western 'scientific' and 'technological' knowledge as a sole form of knowledge system, and particularly, as negated to the indigenous and folkloric ones have wrought the damage of detaching empathy from rationality. Both, however, are needed to sustain human relationship with the Earth (all beings and things). This problem has been associated with the lack of empathy- "humans damage places not because they fail to understand them, but because they are yet to feel for them, like kin" [4]. Perspectives that foster an attitude of kinship tie are then needed. Folkloric studies which can illuminate those perspectives, hence, are essential to relocate human's attitude towards a balanced and fair perception of the human and nonhuman groups.

As one of the most populous single ethnic nations in Africa, the Oromo people own rich wisdom of folklore performed in various contexts and genres. As the people relied for long on the verbal means to transfer their wisdom to posterity, their oral literature remains largely to be storehouse of the wisdoms, values and philosophy of the Oromo. Hence, to understand the symbolic significances of the various conceptualizations pertaining to nature and women, one important target could be the mythos/symbols in oral literature. An attempt to delve into it, as several scholars have attested, becomes vital to comprehend the "values" and "wisdoms" espoused in the culture [1, 5].

Oral narratives in this study are conceptualized as "prose narratives" [6]. It includes folktales, myths and legends, all of which account for events and beings set in a remote past. These foundational stories aid in conceptualizing ideals in a given society. They are also thought to convert perceptual objects "out there" into real presence" [6]. Folktales for instance transmit for the members of a culture "a set of unstated yet obvious rules" [7]. And more closely, it has been asserted that "environmental construction is frequently embedded in orally transmitted traditions and custom" [8].

Oral narratives, by the same token, are sites where perspectives about gender system in a culture are constructed and imparted. Like other genres of oral literature, they employ metaphors which are expressions of structure of thought in the culture. Metaphors, are analogies which allow listeners/readers "to map one experience in the terminology of another experience", and thus, "to acquire an understanding of complex topics or new situations"

[9]. In addition to expressing thoughts, these metaphors also structure and influence actions. Hence the metaphors become gateways to the cultural codes operating in the society.

This study explores metaphorical representation of nature and women, and the symbolic associations made between them in Oromo oral narratives. Focusing on the metaphors and motifs, and looking at the intersection in the representation of women and nature is important to see if there is any link made between how both women and nature are perceived/treated. In Africa, the bonds between nature and people are considered not only material, but also spiritual and moral [10]. In his view, many African peoples envision a kinship relationship between the natural world and themselves. Oromo tradition is also reported to recognize this coexistence [11]. This scholar argues that in Oromo culture human beings are considered to be distinct but part of the natural world occupying their place in the diversity of the cosmos. They are not considered as 'above' nature and cannot despoil it as they wish.

Feminist readings of some genres of Oromo oral literature conducted by previous researchers, on the other hand, have revealed that women are depicted as inferior to men [12, 13, 14]. Though there are some elements that make the culture unique in its treatment of women, as expressed in these studies, the Oromo tradition is said to reflect a patriarchal predisposition. As a result, though arguments abound about the friendly nature of the tradition of the Oromo towards the physical environment [15, 11], the conceptualization of women in the culture embodies them as 'others' [13, 16]. It becomes imperative from this situation to enquire if there is any relationship or association in the representation of the two entities.

This study, then, attempts to delve into the metaphors used in Oromo oral narratives to represent women and nature, and looks for associations made through mapping the metaphors. It aims to answer three fundamental questions: (1) How are nature and women metaphorically represented in Oromo oral narratives? (2) What forms of connection could be inferred from the symbolization of nature and women in the narratives? and (3) How do the society view the symbolic association?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Narratives, Nature and Women in Oromo Culture***

Storytelling as "an act of mind" in which both narrator and listener are deeply immersed in, thus sharing a universe of experience and understanding of the world: "storytelling is a means by which humans organize and understand the world, and feel connected to it and to each other" [17]. Here, oral narratives provide a vicarious experience wherein one feels intimacy with nature and people around. The narratives are also considered as presenting situated events [18].

Among the Oromo, narratives were and are used as instruments of teaching moral wisdom embedded in the culture to children and youth. The corpus of oral tradition of the people, wherein oral narratives are housed, has been important arena of imparting issues and principles guiding the indigenous life. The studies titled *Borana Folktales* [19] and *Oromo Wisdom Literature* [20], particularly the folk narratives, reveals that the narratives have been used by the people as important means of passing on wisdom from generation to generation.

In tandem, oral narratives shape and construct subjectivities. This happens because they provide constructions of experiences which in turn influence perception. Among the Oromo, folktales can give factual data on different subjects, and express moral values, either positively or negatively, through a judgment against a given vice or defect [20]. Others also add that the Oromo transmit their history to the younger generation through the tradition of *argaa-dhageettii*. *Argaa* literally means “that which is seen”, whereas, *dhageettii* means “that which is heard.” [21] *Argaa-dhageettii* refers to both past and present events witnessed. These narratives account for imaginative experiences in the tradition and present ideals which embody values, items of advice or warnings, orders or prohibitions which, among others, depict the image of nature and women.

Every issue imaginable, including that of issues pertinent to gender and nature, could be the subject of oral narratives. Indeed, the narratives metaphorically construct how both nature and gender are perceived among the society. In the indigenous religion of the Oromo, *Waaqa* (God) is given an image of father, and the Earth, that of a fertile and caring mother. Workineh discusses such an idea, but argues that in Oromo culture “the earth is not considered as *Waaqa's* (God's) wife” [21]. He further explains that the Oromo are not interested in gender, and in referring to it as a mother, he argues, they are specifying the “fertility and creativity of the Earth”. But it appears evident that in considering the Earth as mother, and God as father, the people attribute the cultural feminine and masculine gender to both, respectively. In fact, some of the oral narratives of the people present the Earth metaphorically as the wife of *Waaqaa*. One particular evidence could be cited from the oral poetry/song of the people in which the Earth (*dachee*) is referred to as so in “*Dache nagaan bultee, yaa ishee niitii Waaqaa*”/ *greetings mother earth, thou wife of Waaqa*”. As Workineh has also cited [21], though with serious doubts, Eike Haberland asserts that the Eastern Arsi Oromo believe that “*lafti niitii Waaqaati*” which means “the Earth is *Waaqa's* wife” [24].

Oromo cultural practices manifest gender stereotypes [24]. In his analysis of gender system, Jeylan claims, in areas where the *Gada* system is functioning properly, as in Borana and Guji, there have been forces of law governing gender and other relationships between members of the society. In areas where the *Gada* system has shrunk, he argues, there are ample tacit social value systems that still enforce gender ideology. Like in other cultures in Africa, among the Oromo, gender is the fundamental element underlying the structure of male and female power, access to property, participation in social activities and the generalized ideology of role assumption. But different from other cultures, the Oromo women do have their own power with regard to some cultural rituals wherein they reflect their power. The context of power of women in the *Atete* ritual celebrated only by women has also been discussed by other scholars who have made an extensive research among the people [25]. According to him, the *Atete* ritual shows that in the traditional Oromo society, men are functionally dependent on women in many ways.

Although there is limited empirical evidence showing the association between women and nature [26, 27], the Oromo people believe in the existence of women-nature link [25]. This claim of Legesse is theoretically supported by ecofeminists, as they investigate how cultural link is made between women and nature. The *Atete* practice by women is one part of a belief system that women are intermediary figures between *Waaqa* that represents nature and the physical world or human. The myth has it that *Waaqa* listens to women's desire and instantly responds to it. This is a part of the belief system that women are closer to nature in their nurturing and

life-sustaining activities. Jeylan attests that his observation of the *Atete* ceremony celebrated among Arsi Oromo women and the interview he conducted confirmed the existence of such reality among the Oromo. He claims “women’s prayer was used in the past as a powerful means of terminating harsh ecological disruptions and other social crises such as protracted warfare.” [24]. He adds that such problems are not troubling as they would be handled by the women, and men just need to “urge the womenfolk in their core band to gather around a sacred *Qiltuu* (sycamore tree), distinguished ford or high ground, or any renowned *ujubaa* (tree shrine)” [24]. The women gather and pray to revert the affliction. Seen from ecofeminist point of view, such a practice is related to the perspective that the theorists propound, that women are nearer to nature and know how to take care of it [28].

## **2.2. Ecofeminism as Conceptual Framework**

Ecofeminism is a theoretical inquiry which looks into the link made between the conceptualization of nature and women. It sees the abuse of nature and domination of women as a practice that has gone hand-in-glove. The theory embarks on deconstructing the cultural association made between nature and women as common legitimate targets of men’s domination in order to liberate both [29]. In its current form, ecofeminism understands that all forms of oppression (race, class, gender, nature, etc.) are interconnected and should be dealt with together [29].

The approach accommodates diversified perspectives united in their devotion to ending oppressions. Merchant categorizes these perspectives as ‘liberal’, ‘cultural’, and ‘social and socialist’ ecofeminism [30]. Others on the other hand identify two variants of ecofeminism: ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ [31]. Another scholar also suggested two types: ‘difference’ and ‘deconstructive’ ecofeminism [32]. These variations show the difficulty of establishing boundaries between the different forms of ecofeminism supported by different scholars. As our goal is not to discuss the different forms of ecofeminism, we have focused on the perspective on which the study is based, and highlighted on the paradigm.

This study follows the ‘deconstructive’ perspective forwarded in Dobson’s classification [32]. Deconstructive ecofeminism is different from ‘difference’ ecofeminism which has three strands of thoughts. In difference ecofeminism, female values are considered to be distinct from male values; women are considered to be closer to nature, and the exploitation of nature is linked to the oppression of women. The deconstructive ecofeminism, on the other hand, assumes that the link between women and nature is a social construction, and argues that women do not have essential relationship to nature which men do not have. The ecofeminists in this category add that such affirmation harbors the dualistic and hierarchal vision which is considered to be the root of the oppression. They suggest the dismantling of what cultural practices inculcated in women; the ‘feminine’ qualities and in men; the ‘masculine’ qualities. An ecofeminist analysis in this approach is expected to recognize this and attempt to deal with it.

In short, the ecofeminist perspective followed in this study recognizes that ecological problems are social problems and cultural problems. Many ecofeminists share the perception that the oppression of women and ecological degradation are connected in that they both arise “within a society whose fundamental model of

relationship continues to be one of domination” [29]. The goal in deconstructing such cultural assumptions then is calling for changes that foster egalitarian social relations which becomes a precondition for an ecologically healthy society. The framework used, however, takes into account the cultural realities of the people and attempts to ward off against the importation of foreign perspectives as the perspective of the people are addresses through empirical data.

### **3. Methods and Materials**

This study employed a qualitative design and followed a narrative discourse analysis in examining the narratives collected through fieldwork and from secondary sources. The data was gathered from four administrative zones of Oromia regional state (*West Arsi, Guji, Jimma and Eastern Hararghe*). Key informant detailed interview was employed as a tool to gather the narratives from elders (male and female) in the research sites. Snowball sampling technique was used in selecting the informants. A total of 12 elders and 8 key informants were consulted in the process of data collection.

The fieldwork was conducted from August to December 2013 and covered eight districts in four administrative zones. These are *Haromaya* and *Kersa* from Eastern Hararghe; *Adola* and *Oda Shakiso* from Guji; *Aris Negelle* and *Kofele* from West Arsi, and *Manna* and *Kersa* from Jimma Zone. Access to informants was facilitated by the help of district and zonal level administrators of Oromia Culture and Tourism office. A large amount of narratives were collected from the fieldwork, but all the narratives were not used as some do not fit to the objective of the investigation. As a result, the researchers transcribed and translated those which are relevant and added narratives from works published by independent publishers, and mostly by Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau as secondary data.

The data gathered were organized thematically based on the concepts/metaphors the narratives portray. Following that, a descriptive analysis was conducted. The analysis was conducted entirely using ecofeminist theoretical perspective. Ecofeminism as has been indicated above looks into representation of the workings of dominion (hierarchical power) in literature. As a result, the study employed the deconstructive tools of ecofeminism to scrutinize conceptualizations about the human and nonhuman ‘others’ as inscribed in the Oromo oral narratives. The analytical framework looks at the connection between all forms of oppression, and follows a holistic paradigm in interpreting discourses of power. The approach believes in the idea that “the ideology that authorizes injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” [33]. Though the researchers recognize that there are variations in the ecofeminist framework, they opted for Dobson’s approach: “deconstructive ecofeminism” [32], which suggest digging beyond the cultural constructions that embed enmeshed forms of oppression and domination. This approach gives an opportunity to conduct a resistant reading of the discourses inscribed in the narratives.

The analysis addresses both the symbolic representations and metaphorical associations in the narratives and the society’s views on the representations and associations gathered through interview.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. Nature in Oromo Oral Narratives: Units of Image Analysis

Following the approach of previous researchers for other genres (proverbs and songs) [20], an attempt has been made to look into what the narratives present about the people’s conceptualization of nature. First, the occurrences of the images of nature (both human and non-human) are construed based on the units of images observed in the narratives.

Following that, the typical images dominant in the narratives are analysed based on the reoccurrence of the images. Among the narratives collected from fieldwork and secondary sources, 85 stories were used to analyse the units of image. The units of image and the occurrences are presented in the following tables.

**Table 1:** Units of Image analysis in Oromo oral narratives

<b>Units of Image</b>		
Categories of Image	Occurrence	Percent age
<b>1. Human</b>	237	<b>27.15%</b>
a. Men	172	
b. Women	65	<b>19.7%</b>
2. Plants	47	<b>7.45%</b>
3. Animals	209	<b>5.38%</b>
<b>4. Physical Objects/Phenomena</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>23.9%</b>
a. Natural	212	
b. Artificial(man-made)	168	<b>43.52%</b>
		<b>24.28%</b>
		<b>13.24%</b>
Total	873	100%

**Table 2:** Recurrence of typical images in Oromo oral narratives

Typical Images		
Physical Objects		Occurrence
<b>Natural</b> .....		<b>705</b>
I.	Human .....	237
II.	Animals.....	209
III.	Plants and trees.....	47
IV.	Physical Material things...	212
<b>Artificial Objects</b> .....		<b>168</b>
V.	Artefacts.....	118
VI.	Food and beverage.....	28
VII.	Clothing .....	22
Total		<b>873</b>

The first table indicates that, in the Oromo narratives considered, the place given to non-human nature (72.85%) is much greater than the one given to the human (27.15%). It was based on such preponderance that Sumner referred to Oromo proverbs as “ecological” [20]. Following that line one might argue that the narratives are also ecological as the occurrence of the units of image abounds for the non-human part of the natural world. But still, as conceptualization goes beyond the preponderance of reference to nature, such a generalization will not do justice unless the motifs or “the folk ideas” [34], are explored. The table also reveals that the percentage of references to women in the narratives is by far less than the occurrence for men. The gender emphasis appears to be dominated by the masculine. The categories used in the table, however, are quite general and each encompasses several types of their kind as illustrated in each of the narratives. But the occurrence of the typical images in the narratives considered is summarized in the second table. Table 2 presents the recurrence of typical natural and man-made images in the narratives. But it is not exhaustive as anything imaginable can be referred to in the narrative which could be considered as a natural or man-made entity. The images and categories have been identified through listening to the narratives collected.

#### **4.2. Symbolic Representation of Nature: A textual Analysis**

##### **4.2.1. Nature as Comforting Mother , Caretaker and Wife**

The conceptualization of nature as mother is one of the recurrent images in Oromo culture. Various genres of Oromo oral literature have depicted the earth as mother, and the tradition of identifying it as such has long been in practice. Such a conceptualization is indicated by informants in the interview sessions. The metaphorical identification of the earth as a mother to all creations is an important issue, for instance in oral poetry of the society. In the folk poem ‘*dachee*’ which is reduced to written form and translated into English by Zelalem Abera [22], refers to Earth as mother of all creations, and as wife of God. The folk poem begins with greetings addressed to this mother figure by the speaker: “*Dache nagaan ooltee?/ Yaa ishee niitii Waaqa;’/ Greetings mother earth Thou wife of Waaqa;’* and goes on portraying it as a caring and loving being that is impartial in her



treatment. It has harmonious relation with people and is represented as alive, and has human characteristic features.

The voice addresses mother earth like a human mother, greeting her and inquiring about her well-being. This folk poem embeds the indigenous perspective of representing nature among the Oromo. It is included in this section to throw light on the common motifs structuring the folk poem. It metaphorically depicts the earth (nature) as mother, and as an abode where man gratifies his needs with its ubiquitous resources and accommodations (mother earth is generously serves humankind, and never complains about the infliction of wound on her by humans). The speaker seems to be aware of the troubles coming to mother earth from the inhabitants/benefactors, but overshadows it with the enduring quality of mother earth, which, in spite of the mistreatment, serves all equally

<i>Dache nagaan ooltee?</i>	<i>Greetings mother earth</i>
<i>Yaa ishee niitii Waaqa;</i>	<i>Thou wife of Waaqa;</i>
<i>Irri kee midhaanii</i>	<i>Above thee is grain</i>
<i>Jalli kee bishaanii</i>	<i>Beneath thee is water</i>
<i>Du'aan sirra ciisaa</i>	<i>The dead rest on thee</i>
<i>Jiraan sirra fiigaa</i>	<i>The living run on thee</i>
<i>Yoo sitti awwaalani</i>	<i>If we bury in thee</i>
<i>Nan ajaaye hinjettu</i>	<i>Thou never complaineth of stench</i>
<i>Sirra yoo qotani</i>	<i>If we plough thee</i>
<i>Nan madaaye hinjettu</i>	<i>Thou never complaineth of wound</i>
<i>Gara-baldheetti koo</i>	<i>Our all-embracing mother</i>
<i>Ati nagaan bultee?</i>	<i>How didst thou spend thy night?</i>
<i>Ati nagaan ooltee</i>	<i>How didst thou spend thy day?</i>
<i>Dache yaa dinqitu!</i>	<i>O thou wondrous earth!</i>
<i>Jaartii garaa meetii</i>	<i>Mother full of treasures</i>
<i>Sirra qonnee nyaanna</i>	<i>We farm and feed from thee</i>
<i>Jiraa keenya baatta</i>	<i>Alive, thou carry us</i>
<i>Yaa sugeessituu koo</i>	<i>O thou gratifier of our needs</i>
<i>Sirra horree yaasnaa</i>	<i>We reproduce on thee</i>
<i>Du'aa keenya nyaatta</i>	<i>Deceased, thou devour us</i>
<i>Yaa gumeessituu koo.</i>	<i>O thou the accommodator</i>
<i>Sooressa abbaa shittoo</i>	<i>Be it the perfume-soaked rich</i>
<i>Natti urgaaye jettee</i>	<i>With aroma and scent</i>
<i>Ofitti fudhattee</i>	<i>Thou doth take him unto thee</i>
<i>Iyeessa abbaa cittoo</i>	<i>Be it the scabies-infested poor</i>
<i>Natti ajaaye jettee</i>	<i>With his bad odour</i>
<i>Deebiftee hingalshitu</i>	<i>Thou does not reject him</i>
<i>Yaa wal qixxeessituu koo!</i>	<i>O thou the leveler! [22]</i>

This poem presents a feminized image of nature, the Earth (*dache*) as a caring mother devoted to serving her children avoiding complaints over their wrong deeds. Among the Oromo mother is associated with positive images and that of fertility. It also represents the concept of passivity. The feeling that this poem invokes is that of empathy and caring. But read beyond the lines, the poem reveals a hidden power working from behind the representation. Seen from the point of view of ecofeminism, the poem justifies an interconnected logic of control through forming a map of conceptualizing nature and women across the same plane of metaphorical representation. Nature and women become objects of dominion for they are both passive recipients of man's aggression. Besides, it has the potential to be reified and then perpetuate the dualistic vision.

Oromo oral narratives considered for this study also reveal similar representation. Mythical tales, for instance, identify the earth as the mother of all living things. Mythical explanations about the origin of life and the physical world in Oromo oral tradition indicates that in the distant past the heaven and earth were so near to each other. Human beings came from the fertilization of heaven and earth. In a short narrative from *Borana Folktales*, it is narrated in the mythical tales that “*Long ago, Heaven and Earth lay close together. Heaven fertilized the earth and the Earth bore him men*”. This imagery carries the conceptualization that the earth, the feminine figure, bore men in her womb, and the masculine figure (Heaven) fertilized her

The fact that heaven and earth lay close long time ago is a concern of many of the narratives among which is the mythical tale that presents the justification for the sterility of the mule. It is described in this tale that it was because the mule kicked the sky that it distanced itself from the earth, and that the mule remained sterile because of its ignoble act of kicking heaven. That being the case in the mythical narratives, the sexual image presented in the fertilization of the earth from heaven and its bearing of children indicates the conceptualization of nature as mother. As the narrative is very short, only one sentence, it is difficult to speak about the feeling it foregrounds about nature, but it is possible to see the distinctive nature of humanity it tries to present. By considering the compassionate predisposition of the figuration, one might also guess the anthropocentric nature of the discourse of feminizing the earth.

#### **4.2.2. Nature as Embodied Entity**

In the narratives considered for this study, nature also takes the image of a living physical entity separate from the human, but sharing some characteristic features. Human qualities are given to animals, trees, rivers and other physical nature. The metaphorical tie (interaction) made between animals and humankind, and amongst animals in the narratives reveals the attributes. The narrative “*duula bineensotaa/ warfare of animals*” obtained from an informant in Eastern Hararghe zone, *Kersa* district, reveals the way animals are portrayed traditionally. The story presents the journey of animals headed by the cat in their war with man. The cat leaves the house of its owners when it gets old, and on its way, meets other animals (dog, donkey, and the cock) who, like the cat, were not in good situation with their owners. They set off their journey together and united, they wage war against a group of men in which they make the men flee from their houses into the forest. The animals communicate with each other in human language, they understand injustices done to them, the cause of the injustice, and they know how it could be put to an end. These all are attributes of humanity.

This narrative portrays the relationship between humans and the animals as antagonistic, and the cause of the antagonism is humans' mistreatment of nature (the animals). It challenges hierarchical relationship between human oppressors and the oppressed animals. In the motif of this narrative, the human is an exploitive being; who thinks of nature as existing only for his service, and once the service is exhausted, that nature is thrown away; just like a use and throw material. In this narrative, the position accorded to humans is challenged later with the struggle of the animals against the mistreatment in unison. Indeed, the story embeds several voices. At the beginning, the animals are given a separate and lower position from the human, and this reveals the anthropocentric point of view wherein man is placed at the center of everything, and *other* nature at the periphery. Then, the animals are given another position through their incarnation, a position which brings them closer to the human; this is manifested when they are given the characteristic features usually attributed to the human, like: recognizing injustice, and fighting/ escaping it. In doing so, the narrative gives a voice to the non-human that shifts their position from periphery to the center. Such portrayal challenges human-animal hierarchical dichotomy, which gives the lowest position to the animal while putting man at the apex. This phenomenon of decentering is supported by the ecofeminist paradigm of thought [35]

The metaphor of chasing the human from their home to the forest reverses the act of humans' mistreatment of nature. The superior position accorded to animals at last indicates the wish for re-centering (shift) of power. Nature, which was first treated as under the dominion of man, is later figured with the capacity to challenge the power position. This seems to be ecological in the sense that the non-human is metaphorically given an equivalent position with the human. The feeling it evokes here is also ecological and seems to challenge the dualistic hierarchical mode of thought which puts only man at the center.

The story ends with the triumph of animals that were first unethically thrown away at the time they could no more serve the human. Such an ending by itself brings into attention the fact that the narrative carries an ecological predisposition. The banishing of the three animals by the owners, reveals the cultural logic of relation between the two entities; the logic that conceptualizes nature as an object of human service (resource, artifact). This is revealed in the symbolic representations in the story, where the cock was banished because it could no more crew; the dog exiled because it could no more hunt; the donkey displaced for it could no more carry the heavy loads it used to carry for the owners. The understanding here is that, the animals were meant to give those services to man and that defines their identity and existence. The metaphor in this story works through questioning, or inviting others to question the traditional positions accorded to nature.

Other narratives conceptualize nature with similar metaphors. In the narrative, *I am not crueller than a human*, collected from Guji zone, Liban district, the supremacy of humanity is challenged with an opposing perspective, putting the human as an enemy of itself, and portraying the non-human as friendly than the human to human. The narrative, in short, speaks about the deeds of a man and two animals to a man who allowed them stay a night as a guest in his house. The owner of the house was approached first by the two animals (mouse, and monkey) inquiring for his permission to spend the night on their journey in his house. He bluntly replies to them that they cannot be his guests as they are animals (not human). But because they insist saying "*they are not as evil as a human being*" he allows them to stay, astonished at their response. The man comes after the animal and asks for the permission of the owner, and he is easily allowed to stay because he is a human. After some years,

in the course of time, the man loses all his riches and becomes poor begging for alms on the street. Then, the three guests who spent a night in his house meet him on the street side. While the two animals tried to help the poor man in their capacity, the man tried to kill him in order to amass his money.

In this narrative, the distance between human and nonhuman nature is highly emphasized. One can understand how distanced nature is from the human realm from the way the owner responds to the request of the mouse, the monkey and the man. The story at the start presents the superior position held by man in its relation to the animals (nature). The response of the owner of the house to both animals reveals that the human and the animal have a separate place, and it is strange for the animals to ask the human to share their home, the man says “*you are a wild animal*”. Indeed, it is obvious from human terms that they are wild animals, but the discourse here aims at *othering* and placing the animals at a lower position. It suggests that something wild cannot dwell in a house (human dwelling). Yet, to the man, the owner replies “*you are a human, you can stay*”. What is observed here is the anthropocentric affiliation which the character is influenced by. The affinity exists between human kind, and not between the human and other nature. So the discourse of ‘*othering*’ nature is observed. Though both the human figure and the animals have the same problem, the anthropocentric affinity of the owner feels with the human guest forces him perceive and treat both differently. As a result, the human guest is easily welcomed while the permission for the animals (not human) comes after dialogue with the owner.

Strikingly, the story gives a voice to the nonhuman nature by ironically proving the owner wrong in his predisposition. The narrative is destined to failing the human expectation for it presents the concerns understood by both animals. The animals present the argument that they are not eviler than the human and should be treated with respect. “*However cruel I might be, I am not eviler than a human.*” This symbolically challenges the taken for granted affinity between human kinds, and provides a crisis to the expectation of the owner. Seen from the point of view of Oromo ethics of environment, the voice behind the story is putting a challenge to the taken for granted assumption that the human is good and other nature (wild animals) are bad/ dangerous. The sympathy of the owner to the human guest, and his indifferent attitude towards the animals at the initial is based at first on this dichotomy. It can be inferred from the narrative that the motive is questioning the dichotomy rather than conforming to it. This could be understood from the way the story of the narrative advances and how it gets concluded. The words spoken by the two animals, ironic to the expectation of the man, prove to be true as the story unfolds.

As a result, contrary to his initial expectation, the owner at last learns who categorically is ‘wild’ (cruel/enemy). The irony of the situation reveals the crux of the matter. The animals are portrayed as paying back the good deeds done to them by the owner, while the human guest with whom they spent the night at the owner’s house is figured as ignoble. The gulf created between the human and nature (not human) in the mind of the owner is narrowed and that of the relation between humankind further stretched. The owner finally reiterates what the animals told him, and this shows a shift of attitude from the distancing dualist/ hierarchical thinking to an egalitarian/ accommodative attitude which balances the conception of humanity with the non-human (animal in this case). Yet, coming to such a mental status is not an easy task, as man has to be convinced of the wrong predisposition of the attitude he had and the position he occupied and the place he accords to nonhuman nature. What this story does is creating a consciousness wherein man, after the metaphorical struggle of the animals,

recognizes the fault.

The attribution of certain qualities that reveal the importance of nature and that gauges the way the human should treat them are abundant in other narratives. The folktale, *The drowsy banished dog* [36], presents the story of a loyal dog who served its masters when it was young and capable, but thrown away when it grew weary at old age. The anthropocentric valuation of this animal leads the owners to deport it when they failed to get service from this dog. The animal is shown no respect at least for the service it provided to them when it was capable. Though the dog begs them for the reconsideration of their decision, the owners were blinded by the service it should have given them. The animal then heads to the forest to meet its death. The forest is represented here as a 'wild' place separate and distanced from the home (tamed) place, where people and the domestic animals get killed by predators.

Contrary to that expectation, however, what awaits the dog was not the dangerous situation at the forest. A wild animal, fox (which is thought of as a wild dog) approaches the dog, and finally interferes with the situation, winning a bright future for the hopeless dog. The subject position the dog is made to occupy is a victimized/'othered' nature pleading for kind treatment from human. And that of the fox is a sympathetic nature listening to the voice of the victimized. The human subject is represented here as self-centered and advantage seeking being which is deaf to the plight of the victimized.

The mediating role of the fox (usually a trickster animal in Oromo oral narratives) through its tricky means made the owners become conscious of their bias towards the dog. The human figure in the narrative showed an attitude of regret only after the dog helped them recover their child from the fox (a fictive situation organized by the fox). Had it not been with the intervention of the fox by stealing the child from bed, the owners of the dog would not have showed any care about the old dog. The issue that is foregrounded here is humans' treatment of nature (the animal) comes only with the benefits nature gives to them: "*had it not been for the bark of this dog, the fox would have taken our child to the forest, we would have missed him*". This is not a purely ecological (non-anthropocentric) attitude as the care comes only because there is an advantage of some kind gained from the natural entity. Yet, it has a motif of challenging the indifference of humanity towards the victimized others (non-human).

In the narratives considered above, and many others collected through the fieldwork, the non-human nature is given a voice of its own leveling with the human to address the motif of embodiment. This motif challenges the dichotomy established and brings to the table perspectives devoid of attention.

#### **4.2.3. Symbolic Association vis-à-vis Resistance**

The previous two sections dealt with representation of nature (non-human) and its relations with human in general. What follow is perspectives in the narratives pertinent to the cultural categories of gender. In this regard, it is imperative to indicate that metaphors used in depicting images of nature and women in Oromo oral narratives interact and form a synchronized blend. Indeed, it is also important to recognize that while some of the stories affirm the associations, others present a challenging view towards the essential link made between

nature and women. In the following two sub-sections, both the attributes and narrative combats against the ideological mapping are presented.

#### **4.2.3.1. Resisting Symbolic Association between Nature and Women**

As has been stated above, Oromo oral narratives embed voices questioning the androcentric discourse of the essential link between women and nature. A good example of this is reflected in the voice of the narrator in the oral narrative *Muka jawwee dhalaatu arge/ women know how to kill serpent/*, narrated by an elder from *Kersa* district. This oral story presents resistance against the androcentric discourse wherein male dominion over both women and animals symbolically promulgated. So as to present the analysis in this regard, the story is briefly summarized in the following paragraph.

This narrative presents the journey of a serpent and a mouse searching for a means of survival after losing their mother to death. These animals talked to six landlords (men) consecutively but these landlords banished them claiming that the two animals are enemy to man. The animals succeed with the seventh landlord who grants them a plot of land and food for survival. Then they stay for many years with the man, but some day, after they grew up, the serpent swallows the mouse. When the landlord asks what happened to the mouse, the serpent tells him that it swallowed the mouse. Then the man criticizes the serpent for its disrespect and cruel treatment of the animal that endured several challenges with it. The serpent also criticizes the man for blaming it while he himself has never showed respect to his horse, oxen and his wife. It then threatens the man that he would face the fate of the mouse unless he gets honor from the subjects of his dominion (his horse, his oxen and his wife). Contrary to his expectation, the subjects approve that the man is exploitive and disrespectful to them as claimed by the serpent. Finally, while the man was waiting for his time to be swallowed by the serpent, his wife comes up with an idea to save him if he promises not to mistreat her again. Using her tactics the woman kills the serpent and the man was saved at last [37].

The narrative presents the distancing discourse of anthropocentrism at the beginning because these animals were pushed away by the first six landlords who claimed these animals are enemies. It asserts that men are not easy to become sympathetic about the suffering of these animals. The sympathy came with the seventh man, who also becomes convinced about their case after several attempts. The course of the story reveals the challenge presented against humanity's claim of hierarchal relation. But more importantly, it depicts the perspective that nature and women are exploited and subordinated by men in similar fashion. The male figure is unconscious about the subordination he is inflicting on the animals and his wife, but criticizes the serpent for its dishonor in killing its friend with whom they endured hardship. The man came to recognize his tyrannical exploitation after being challenged by the serpent. As a result, the story gives voice to non-human nature to resist the exploitive power of man on non-human (animal) and human others (women).

The narrative embeds the motif of voicing the perspective of the periphery to challenge the hierarchal dichotomy established between different classes of nature. The responses the man gets from his wife and two exploited animals strikingly challenge his androcentric constructions about his definition of self and perspectives.

The Ox replies:

*“Of course you too have no decency, look; you load me with the yoke, and hit me with stick to plough your land, when you are back from the farm, you drink milk and consume bread which is the result of my sweat. Have you ever asked yourself “this bull has toiled a lot today give him some bread?” “You don’t know respect yourself, why do you get surprised with what the serpent did?”[37]*

The Horse replies:

*“Why are you surprised at that, you don’t know how to honor others yourself” “Look, when you ride on me, I gallop and take you to a safe place, in war when the enemy attempt to stab you; I take you home without you being injured, when we are back home you eat butter and bread, you drink milk, but my pay is only dead grass, you don’t know paying back, you get surprised at what the serpent does?”[37]*

The miserable condition of animals under the exploitive hand of the man is the concern of voices presented above. Animals are attributed with the ability to commune with man so as to reveal the concerns. This has been made possible by setting the story in a time far removed from the present “long, long time ago”. The presentation of animals with human qualities is an attempt to step aside from the anthropocentric circle of understanding nature, which confers the ability to think, use language and challenge pain inflicted on oneself only to the human. Indeed, that feature is common to all Oromo oral narratives wherein everything in the ecosystem speaks. The informants indicated that in such settings, all things are given the capacity to speak:

*“bara san waan hundaatu qaaqa, calleen niqaaqxi, sareen niqaaqxi, gingilchaanillee akkuma namaa qaaqxi... yee gingilchaa eessa jirta jedhanii yoo gaafatan, ee kinoo asiin jira jettee namaa deebifti” / in those days all things speak, the necklace speaks, dogs speak, the gingilcha (a material made of grass and used to separate the seeds from scums) itself speaks like the human; when you ask where are thou gingilcha? It responds “I am here” [38]*

The animals then unanimously testified the unethical exploitation undertaken by the man. The man is represented as a being that treats nature carelessly just as a resource to gratify his selfish needs.

Above all, what makes the narrative accommodative of various subordinated voices is its rendering of women’s issue. In the story the project of domination of man is not only on nature (animals) but also on women. The story challenges the unconscious subordination of women through exercising of unfair control over women. It is possible to say that the narrative presents a web of dominion exercised by the male figure. A binary category of power structure is depicted in the narrative: the powerful, exploitative man on the one hand and the subordinated domestic animals and women on the other. The narrator makes the wife side herself with the animals because they are all targets of man’s control. This fits with the claim of ecofeminism that all forms of domination are interconnected and they result from patriarchy and hierarchal worldview. The following is the response of the woman which coincides with the response of the two domestic animals to the man:

*His wife added “what surprises you about it then? You don’t know honor yourself” “Look, I carry children one at my back and the other in my arms, I fetch water from the river, I collect firewood, I keep the calves, but when I bring you your lunch an hour late, you shout at me and*

*confuse me”, “you complain to God that He gave you a stupid woman, if one day you eat boiled beans for dinner you complain, “does my head carry the grinding machine?” “You never say you are tired, and take some rest, that is honor,” you don’t know respect yourself why do you complain about the serpent? [37]*

The wife’s siding of the animals’ resistance against the man breaks the anthropocentric affiliation expected between human beings. From human (especially patriarchal) point of view, one would expect the woman to side her husband, however exploitive he is. But the narrator challenged such assumption and made her determined to reveal the injustice. Her response above is full of the traditional roles assigned to women: taking care of children, fetching water, collecting firewood, tending calves, and feeding her husband. Besides the way she is treated reveals the power relationship between the husband and wife. He calls her stupid. Besides, he has never recognized her toil, but always complains about things. The woman protests that though she did all that in his service, she did not get any recognition, but instead she was downgraded and humiliated by her husband. Like the animals, her contribution is beyond measure, but the honor she should receive finally ends up in being humiliated by her husband.

Being the target of common dominion, the two animals and the woman are unified and seem to fight and challenge man’s exploitation and subordination. But what makes the struggle fated to fail is the ending of the story. At the beginning it was decided by the serpent that if the ox, horse and the wife of the man proved to him that he is exploitive, that he should be swallowed by the serpent the next day. The narrative moves in that line adding frustration to the man with the confirmation from the subjects. But the course of the story changes at last when the woman becomes sympathetic with her husband. Negotiating with him on the condition that he will not mistreat her again, the woman saves he husband from being killed by the serpent. One might interpret such a conclusion to the story in two distinct ways. The first is that however exploited the woman might be, finally she will side her husband as he is human (*specieicism*). Another interpretation of the twist at the ending of the narrative might be that however strong the protest of the women may be, she is doomed to fail. The patriarchal ideology makes her finally resort to reconciliation. But that may also be thought of as the corrective tendency of the culture, not aiming at the perishing of the oppressors, but that they become conscious of their wrongs and given the chance to rectify it. That however happens only in relation to the woman and not for the animals (and this again gives a clue to the anthropocentric tendency.)

#### **4.2.3.2. Symbolic Association of Nature and Women**

Oromo oral narratives are replete with the depiction of affinity between women and animals. This affinity is shown in the discourse the narratives establish about the metaphorical marriage union between the two entities. While men are represented as detached from/ distanced to nature (animals) because of their depiction as antagonistic to them, women are conceptualized as establishing affinity between themselves and the animals on account of their weakness.

The narrative about a girl named *Sule* [19], for instance reflects the symbolic affinity between women and animals, and antagonism between men and animals. In this story, a certain girl marries a lion and they start to live together. But her father who lost her started to look for her, and he hears a rumor that a girl with his



daughter's name married a lion. Then he went to where she is and asked her if that is true, and she replies it is so. The father comes at night and kills the lion. His daughter, the wife of the lion, cries unceasingly. Her father skins the lion and stretches the hide to dry. The daughter sits on the hide and cries, then, the hide takes her to the sky to rejoin her with her husband. This narrative conceptualizes the female as friendly to nature and her father as distanced and positioned above the animal. The mythical story which presents the willingness of Sule to live in marriage union naturalizes the ideological claim of inferior (natural) nature of the feminine figure which could be distanced like the animal.

The logic behind the mythical possibility of the union, which is reflected in the unceasing cry of Sule about the murder of her husband (the lion), purports the animalizing discourse. Men are thought to correct by interfering in such meddling between the girl and the distanced lion by showing their power over the animal and rescuing her. The cry of the girl and her rejoining with the lion at the end of the story seem to implicate irrationality of the girl which the man is fighting. In all the stories, there is no such association/ affinity represented between men and the animals.

Similar to the story about Sule, other narratives reveal the mythical marriage union between women and animals. And, in some of these stories, the union happens from the interest of the women, and at times situations (the need for rescue) force them to form the union. But in all the cases marriage happens only for the women, and at times the stories depict that they found the life to be interesting. In the narrative that accounts about a woman and her daughter, for instance, the girl has to negotiate with several animals to be saved from the hobgoblin that has killed her mother by saying she will marry them if they save her. The mouse finally saves her and they live together for longtime until the animal dies. The girl then leaves the place and on her way again asks a lion to marry her. The lion accepts her proposal attracted by her beauty and they live together happily ever after. What makes marital union worthy of notice is the symbolic dissolving of the anthropocentric boundary between humankind and non-human nature. Yet, the boundary remains intact for the masculine figure. The metaphorical association then comes from the animalizing discourse of patriarchy which distances both nature and women from man.

In "*Qarote fi Gawile*" / *wise and foolish sisters*/ [19] as well the same subject of women establishing marital union with animals is emphasized. The narrative presents how a lion married the wise sister first by abduction and later through her parent's agreement up on his fulfillment of the criteria expected of it (jumping over a series of nine spears). The lion was killed at the last jump deliberately, and the girl who at first fled from him now mourns his death. The story ends with the rejoining of the girl who sat on the flayed skin of the lion with the lion in heaven. Her father had antagonistic relation with the lion but the daughter is represented as craving to live with the animal in marriage union. This story reflects the patriarchal logic of representing women as weak and irrational and one that needs rescue from the *othered* animal. It is the projection of this irrationality on to them that makes the stories replete with women marrying animals.

So the association made reveals the androcentric predisposition which distances men and put them at a higher position than women and nature. This narrative indicates the existence of spiritual connection between women and nature (the tree). The same kind of connection is made in other narratives that present other elements of

nature like rivers, mountain, caves, etc. to which the women speak and get some kind of help from. Nature understands women's language and the women know that they can do something.

The connection established between women and nature in the narratives is metaphorical and representational. The repeated motifs in the stories, however, reveal the workings of power (human and male power) working silently as an ideology which indirectly operate at reality level. The narratives are used to explain (though mostly mythical) how the world operated for the people and how things become the way they are. In one of the narratives, *Gods rod (rainbow)*, we see the lion being represented as human. It says, "*in those days the lion was human. Only poverty drove him into the bushes and there he became a beast*".[19] In order to establish a context for the possibility of connection between the women and the animal, such a framework is given. If that context worked for all human, why didn't any of the men marry any of the animals? The thing is, such a context is created only to create a conducive environment for justifying the connection between women and nature. The proximity discourse enables the masculine figure claim superiority over both entities.

#### **4.3. Empirical Perspectives on the Symbolic Association**

The analyses presented above mainly focused on the theoretical discussion of the narratives through the framework of ecofeminism. As it is imperative to see into how the symbolic figurations impact the current behavior at idea level, the researchers through interview have inquired into whether the society forms such a link in their perception of the relation between nature and women. This issue has also been addressed by anthropologists and philosophers who have conducted studies among the people. In this study as well, beyond what the oral texts reveal, the perspectives of the owners of the narratives on the metaphorical association have been deliberated through in-depth interview.

Accordingly, it is found out that in the tradition of the people, nature is not distanced from the human realm. The earth is represented as mother: the people say "*Dachiin tun haadha, hundaa dandeessee jiraachifti, bineensillee, namnillee ilmaan ishiit kan bulchu ishii.*" / *This earth is a mother; she carries all that live on her: the animals and even the human are her children living under her guidance* [39]. This kind of representation among the people has long been identified by researchers [11, 23]. The people underscore that they suck the breast of the earth as the baby does its mother's breast. Such a conceptualization indicates the close identification of the people with nature. All the things depend on the earth for survival and the mother figure provides with all the necessity of life.

Parallel to this, God is conceptualized as a father figure. The origin of the natural world is associated to the interaction between the mother figure and the father figure which together makes life complete. The earth is also identified as wife of God and human beings are children of the earth. Though Workneh claims that there is not such a claim among the Oromo that the earth is the wife of Waqaa [21], it was commonly used in the oral tradition, and our interview with the informants also indicated the existence of such symbolic association. "*akka duudhaa duri'iitti, dur dur laftummaan kunuu akka haadha worraa Rabbiitti laalamti jedhama, ilmaan (uumama) kana horuun kadhuftelle sanumarraayi.*" / *In the old mystical times, it is said, this earth was considered as the wife of the creator, the reproduction of life on earth must have come from that* [40]. The

fertility of the earth, which Workineh indicated [21], makes more sense with the identification of the earth as mother who is also a wife.

The feature of fertility becomes the point of symbolic connection made between women and nature. The analogy used in the following transcript from interview reveals how women are thought to have association with nature.

*Lafti midhaan nuu laatti inkabajnaa. Dubartiin inhorti ishiinillee kabaja qabdi. Lafarra facaafannee akkuma midhaan argannu dubartii irraa ijoollee arganna. Lafarraa wanti marti argama, dubartiirraa namni argama*

*The earth gives us crops, we respect her. Women reproduce and we respect her too. As we get crops from sowing on the earth, we get children from women. We get everything from the earth as you get children/human from women [41]*

The association made here is based on the reproductive capacity of nature and women. This quality of both becomes the basis for the metaphorical association between the two entities. The feminization of nature is recognized in the way the earth is addressed in the words of the informant above. Women are also presented with natural image. Such association is not observed for men, and it appears that there is working of power involved in limiting the connection to women. In the above perspective, both the earth and women are related to man in the same manner. In the metaphor of tilling the land we see the metaphor of rape of the earth. To make her fruitful man has to sow seed, and in similar fashion, for the woman to produce children the same image of intercourse needs to happen. The capacity to reproduce becomes the source of respect for both. The informants say

*“Dubartiin deettuudhaa Rabbi finna kana akka ishiirraa argannu nu godheeraa”,/ the women give birth, Rabbi has made it that they give us generations through them.*

*“Dubartiin wooyu, haati wooyu deettuun wooyu, jaaltittiin wooyu.”/ Women are wooyu, mothers are wooyu, those who give birth are wooyu and the lovers are wooyu [42]*

The informants explained that the respect for them comes from such a characteristic endowed to them. They are respected in the indigenous all-encompassing system of the people: “Wayyooma sirna Gadaatti namaatiifi, waaqaa, lafaa muran keessatti, kabajni olaanaan kan dubartiif kennamu. Dubartiin wooyu, haati wooyu deettuun wooyu, jaaltittiin wooyu.” / “In the ethos included in the Gada system for, human, sky and the earth, a higher respect is paid to the women. Women are wooyu, mothers are wooyu, those who give birth are wooyu and the lovers are wooyu” [42]. The respect and reverence paid to them then has a link with their natural potential of fertility (bearing children) and continuing the generation. The service women and nature render to man is also another point of affinity from the perspective of males. Life would not be easy for men if there is no nature. In similar fashion a life without women for the men will be so disorganized. So based on the service they render to men, women and nature are both conceptualized as nearer metaphorically. This actually seems a working of the claim of dominion. It represents both nature and women as existing in the service of man.

*Dubarttoota waliinii bootaa tokkot wal fakkeenna qaban jechuudha. Maalii, munni bosonaa kuni gaaddisa gaariit qaba jalaa aduun yoo namat baate jalat dheessan, dubartiin kabajaa guddaa qabdi manni isiin hinjirre manaa miti, lafti isiin hinjirre lafaa miti. Uummanni dachee tanarratti uumame dubartootaan jiraata, dubartootatu horee, dubartii irraa uummanni uumamte tun dubartii irraa waan dhalattekabajaa guddaa qabdi, woyyooma guddaa qabdi. Mana kana amma yoo isiin hinjiraanne, manni kun duwwaa, ona jechuudha, yoo isiin jiraatte ibidda bobeesite, dhiyaana namaa bilcheessite, keessummaa namat dhufte kabajaa guddaan namarraa galchiti. Beerriniif bosonni lafarrat uumamte tun kabajaa guddaa qaba, ilaalchi isaanii wal fakkaata jechuudha.*

*Nature is similar to women at in point. That is, this forest has a good shade; one can stay in the shade during the burning Sun. Women have respect because, the house where there are no women is not a house at all, and the place where she does not exist is not comfortable. Life appears to sustain in this world because of the women. It is the women that help us reproduce and all the creation came from the feminine figure. So she has a respect. She has a higher woyyu. When she is not around, this house is like a desert, empty. If she is around always there is fire in your house, she will prepare food. If a respected stranger comes to your house she will take care of him. Women and the forest of the earth have a bigger respect. The way they are perceived is similar in this way [42].*

Apart from the fertility and the services, some psychological characteristics of women are used as bases for their affinity with nature. One claim is that the women are sympathetic from their nature and treat nature with a caring attitude. An informant indicated the following:

*Dubartiin gara laafoodha. Yoo rakkatan, yoo bonni, waraanni, dhibeen gadoon adda addaa biyyatti bu'u dubartiin nuu kadhaa jedhani. Kuni haga ammaa jira. Dubartiin gara laafoo, Rabbi isaanii dhagaya. Ka finna dhabellee, sirna ateetee keessatti waan raawwatuufi jira.)*

*Women are sympathetic. When the people are in hardship, when there is draught, war, other disasters occur in an area, they will ask the women to pray. This exists even now. They have good hearts, God hears their prayer. Parents, who failed to produce children, will have some procedures they need to pass through in the ateetee ritual [43].*

The same conceptualization of the women is forwarded by another informant who reflected that women don't rush to destroying nature as they have a sympathetic attitude. Contrary to that the men are represented as destructive and with the will of controlling and subduing nature.

*Dubartiin gara laafina waan qabaniif, waan tokko balleessuutti hinfiigan. Fakkeenyaaf dhiirri adamoo baha, bineensa fixa, dubartiin kana hingootu. Odoo bira geesseeyyuu hinworaantu. Isaan dhiiraa ammoo ka dorrobe yoo arganillee in waraanu, kan foolatus odoo argan in waraanan.)*

*As the women are light hearted, they don't rush to destroy things. For instance, men go for hunting, they kill the animals. The women do not do that. She won't stab the animal though she came near to it. But the men won't spare even the pregnant animal; they will not leave even those animals on labor [44].*

The feature given to women here reveals the attitude that women are nearer to nature because they have a caring heart, while the male are distanced from nature due to their destructive predisposition. But the fact that the men kill pregnant animal is not in the hunting tradition of the people as it contradicts with the discriminatory and responsible hunting researchers [21, 45] attested. Hence, it can be understood from the empirical data that the symbolic associations between nature and women are made on the justification of fertility, service and compassion. In such considerations, however, the silent gender ideology appears to be eminent.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to delve into how nature and women are symbolically delineated in Oromo oral narratives. Its focus mainly was on metaphors and motifs that speak about both entities to decipher if there are conceptual associations made between them through the framework of ecofeminism. The field work data and secondary sources were analysed focusing on the images the narratives impart, the discourses they embody and the perspectives they voice. The analysis reveals that the oral narratives are replete with images of nature and women. The unit of image analysis indicates the dominance of reference to the non-human nature which is indicative of the eco-centred nature of the narratives. Nature is positively portrayed as a nurturing mother and an incarnate entity capable of speaking for itself in human terms. In representing nature as an embodiment, the narratives present a discourse that challenges the anthropocentric perspectives that understands human nature relation only from the perspective of hierarchal dualism. Nature and women are symbolically associated on several grounds in the narratives, but the perspective is not purely on the conformation to the essential links some ecofeminists argue for. In the discourse behind the symbolic associations made, one can understand the motifs of feminizing nature and naturalizing women. The mythical marriage union (women to nature) symbol and antagonistic relations (men to nature), for instance, embeds the androcentric discourse of power. The positive symbolic associations made between nature and women have been confirmed through the empirical data derived from the in-depth interview wherein the grounds of comparison rely on common features natural fertility, and sustaining value in addition to the claim of psychological sympathy of women towards nature. Besides, the narratives challenge androcentric claim of superiority through an ironic bite that proves in the events of the narratives that man is not actually what he perceives of himself to be. This discourse is supported by ecofeminism as it deconstructs the *essentialized* discourse of male superiority over nature and women. Yet it is imperative to understand that these narratives present a complex discourse of power entanglement, and should not be reduced to a simple calculation of siding the perspectives forwarded under the framework of western ecofeminism. The narratives present a good deal of resistance against dominion, but also succumb into the discourses that they resist through their twist towards the conclusion of the narratives. A good example of this is seen in how the story of narrative '*muka jawwee dhalaatu arge*'/women know how to kill serpent discussed in the analysis section. Hence, it can be concluded that Oromo oral narratives embed a symbolic mapping of nature and women which complexly present a discourse of affirming and challenging both anthropocentric and adrocentric perspectives.

## 6. Recommendation

This study has not exhausted the rich ecological perspectives addressed in Oromo oral narratives; it has focused only on the associations made. Hence, the authors recommend a further comprehensive investigation on the issue. Besides, a comparative research on the different genres of Oromo oral literature is a worth consideration.

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