

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS**  
**COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF**  
**WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: NIGERIA**

**Transcript of Joyce Agofure**  
**Interviewer: Elisha Renne**

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**Dr. Joyce Agofure** was born on April 3, 1978 in Benin City, the capital of Edo State, in southern Nigeria. She first attended primary school in Benin City and continued her education, obtaining her first degree in English and Education. She then entered the Masters' Degree Program at Ahmadu Bello University-Zaria where she received a Masters' Degree and subsequently a PhD in English literature. She was particularly interested in eco-feminism and the consequences of climate change on the lives of women. As a senior lecturer and the Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies in the Department of English at Ahmadu Bello University, she teaches courses which include Introduction to Literature, African Literature and Literature Theory. She assigns readings in Nigerian women's literature, some of which consider the challenges faced by women which she discusses in these courses. She was able to expand her knowledge of eco-feminism, particularly the ways that women are seen as natural being and the environment is characterized as feminine, during her tenure as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Idaho. This experience has enabled her to become involved in developing a course on Eco-Feminism to be taught in the Department of English at ABU.

**Elisha P. Renne** is Professor Emerita in the Departments of Anthropology and of Afroamerican and African Studies, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. She has conducted ethnographic research in Nigeria, Ghana, and the US. Her interests include African ethnology and infectious disease; gender and reproductive health; and religion and the anthropology of textiles. She is the author of *Cloth That Does Not Die* (1995); *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town* (2003); *The Politics of Polio in Northern Nigeria* (2010); and *Veils, Turbans, and Islamic Reform in Northern Nigeria* (2018). She has also edited the volume, *Veiling in Africa* (2013), has co-edited the volume, *Textile Ascendancies: Aesthetics, Production, and Trade in Northern Nigeria* (2020) and has published in the journals *Africa*, *American Anthropologist*, *CSSH*, *Islamic Africa*, *JRAI*, *RES*, and *Textile History*. Her recent study, *Death and the Textile Industry in Nigeria*, of the consequences of textile mill closures in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, included interviews with 105 widows and will be published in November 2020.

**Elisha Renne: Alright. Thank you so much for coming this morning. We're very happy to see you. Before we begin, I would like to know, how would you like me to address you? What's your title? How would you like me to address you?**

Dr. Joyce Agofure: Doctor Joyce is fine.

**ER: Okay. I will be calling you Dr. Joyce. And I'm Dr. Elisha.**

JA: Nice to meet you.

**ER: And this is Hassana. Hajiya Hassana Yusuf. So, to begin with, I would just like to... I think you've seen the questions?**

JA: Mhm. Although I started looking for mine, but it's okay.

**ER: No, it's okay because we're having a conversation. So, just to begin, we'd like some information about your birth date and where you were born.**

JA: Okay. I was born 3rd April, 1978 in Benin City, Edo State<sup>1</sup>, Nigeria.

**ER: I've been to Benin City. It's nice. So, could you explain how you became what you've become? Where did you start? Where did you go to primary school? What were your first experiences? What did you want to be when you grew up?**

JA: I attended primary school in Benin Secondary School. All of that in Edo state. It wasn't easy. You know, being a girl child, you are exposed to so many challenges. Just being a girl, you're told... there's this judgmental attitude towards you when you are a girl child. "Oh, are you sure you're going to finish school? Are you sure you won't drop out of school? Are you sure you won't get pregnant? With these your eyes, the way you look, are you sure you're going to finish school? So, we grew up in that kind of attitude. And coming from a background where we were like six girls, and being the oldest, I saw it as a huge challenge on my side to let the people know that being a girl child doesn't mean you can't be who you want to be. That was always at the bottom of my mind. I wanted to correct that wrong impression. That I could make it. And that actually spurred me on and today, I'm what I am in academia as a lecturer. And not just as a lecturer, as a postdoctoral fellow<sup>2</sup>.

**ER: Where did you go to university?**

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<sup>1</sup> Benin City is located in Southern Nigeria and is the capital of Edo State. Edo State is comprised primarily of the Bini, Owan, Esan, and Etsako ethnic groups and has a population of approximately five million. ("Edo State." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edo\\_State](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edo_State). Accessed October 2, 2020.)

<sup>2</sup> Postdoctoral fellows refer to people that conduct research following the completion of PhD. The fellowship is often mentored or supervised and allows researchers to gain experience before entering their career. ("Postdoctoral fellow." APA. [www.apa.org/education/grad/post-fellow](http://www.apa.org/education/grad/post-fellow). Accessed October 1, 2020.)

JA: My first degree was at Delta State University<sup>3</sup>, Abraka<sup>4</sup>. I read BA Ed<sup>5</sup>. English Language.

**ER: And then for your PhD<sup>6</sup>?**

JA: After that, I came to the north for my Masters program. I had my Masters here at ABU<sup>7</sup>, Zaria<sup>8</sup>. And then my PhD at ABU Zaria as well?

**ER: Both in the department of English?**

JA: Yes. English and Literary Studies.

**ER: So, I'm just curious, what type of English literature interests you, especially?**

JA: I'm so fascinated by environmental literature.

**ER: In what way?**

JA: Issues about the environment are critical issues in the world. Issues about climate change, issues about exploitation going on. These are critical concerns we are all concerned about. That drew me into literature. Especially from where I'm coming from, the Niger Delta region<sup>9</sup>. Edo State. The destruction going on as a result of the oil exploration, drew me into environmental discourse. Then how it also affects women. That brings my concern. When I read something about eco-feminism, I was wowed. So that brought me into...

**ER: So is there Nigerian literature, maybe some novels or short stories, that discuss women's situations in relation to the environment? Could you tell me?**

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<sup>3</sup> Delta State University (DELSU) is a Nigerian government university founded in 1992. DELSU has a central campus located in Abraka along with two other campuses located in Oleh and Asaba. ("History." Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. [www.delsu.edu.ng/history.aspx](http://www.delsu.edu.ng/history.aspx). Accessed October 2, 2020.)

<sup>4</sup> Abraka is a university town located in Delta state, Nigeria, and is home to the Urhobo people. ("Abraka" Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraka>. Accessed October 2, 2020.)

<sup>5</sup> Bachelor of Education (BAEd)

<sup>6</sup> Doctor of Philosophy

<sup>7</sup> Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) is a federal government research university founded on October 4, 1962, located in Zaria, Kaduna State. ("History of Ahmadu Bello University." Ahmadu Bello University. [www.abu.edu.ng/history/](http://www.abu.edu.ng/history/). Accessed October 1, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Zaria is a central city of northern Nigeria, located in Kaduna State. ("Zaria." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaria>. Accessed October 2, 2020.)

<sup>9</sup> The Niger Delta Region is located in Southern Nigeria with primary states including Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Abia, Imo, and Ondo. The region is home to plentiful natural resources; however, mismanagement of the oil and gas industry has resulted in corruption and violence in the region. (Sewell, A. "The Niger Delta: an Overview." SDN. [www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/the-niger-delta/](http://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/the-niger-delta/). Accessed October 2, 2020.)

JA: Sure. I've read Kaine Agary's<sup>10</sup> *Yellow-Yellow*<sup>11</sup> where she tells about the experiences of women in the Niger-Delta region whose farmland have been destroyed and how this in turn affects them as women, as a people and as a society. You know? And how some of these people are impoverished as a result of all of this. And beyond this, coming down to northern Nigeria society, you can also find that in Zaynab Alkali's<sup>12</sup> work. I've actually explored ecofeminism, environmental issues, in Zainab Alkali's work, *The Stillborn*<sup>13</sup>. I've looked at *The Stillborn*. I've also looked at *Cobwebs*<sup>14</sup> by Zaynab Alkali.

**ER: That would be great because you know these interviews are going to be used in classes everywhere around the world. And I know at Michigan, some of the students will be really interested to know about these novels so they can be reading. So that's a really great addition.**

JA: That's good.

**ER: So, I'm just curious, because some of the other women we've talked to, they wanted to do something else before they became what they became today. So, I'm just wondering, did you want to be something else, or you always wanted to be a university lecturer?**

JA: No, I wanted to be a lawyer. But along the line, after I wrote the JAMB<sup>15</sup>, I was told I had 225. I was told I wouldn't be offered admission because I didn't meet the cutoff mark. I found myself into English education. After that, I came for my Masters in Literature and that's how the whole thing changed. And behold. I was told, "No, with what you have, you are very qualified to be a lecturer. You need to be in academia."

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<sup>10</sup> Kaine Agary, a native to Port Harcourt, Nigeria, is an ecofeminist, novelist and editor of TAKAii magazine. Agary received a B.A. in Sociology and Economics from Mount Holyoke College, USA, as well as a M.A. in Public Administration from New York University, USA. Agary won the 2008 Nigerian Prize for Literature for her novel *Yellow Yellow*. ("Interview with Kaine Agary." Sheriff's Shelf. [sheriffgarba.wordpress.com/interviews/august-interviews/interview-with-kaine-agary/](http://sheriffgarba.wordpress.com/interviews/august-interviews/interview-with-kaine-agary/). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>11</sup> *Yellow Yellow* (2006), a novel by Kaine Agary, explores the life of Zilayefa, a young Nigerian woman, impacted by an oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta. The novel encompasses an ecofeminist exploration of environmental injustice. ("History." Fulbright Scholar Program. [www.cies.org/history](http://www.cies.org/history). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>12</sup> Zaynab Alkali, born in Borno State in 1950, is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and academic. Alkali received a B.A. and a PhD in African Studies from Bayero University Kano. Alkali's popular publications include *The Stillborn* (1984), *Cobwebs & Other Stories* (1997), and *The Virtuous Woman*, (1987). ("Zaynab Alkali." Wikipedia. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaynab\\_Alkali/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaynab_Alkali/). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>13</sup> *The Stillborn* (1984), is a classic feminist text written by Zaynab Alkali. The novel is the first of its kind detailing the perspectives of an educated Nigerian Muslim woman's perspective on traditional and modern African ideals. (Yakubu, A. (2009). The woman as incomplete: A re-appraisal of Zaynab Alkali's <i>The stillborn</i>. *Journal Of Cultural Studies*, 1(1). doi: 10.4314/jcs.v1i1.47395. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>14</sup> *Cobwebs & Other Stories* (1997), is a novel written by Zaynab Alkali that details Muslim women's experiences pertaining to education, marriage, family, and careers in Nigeria. (Whitsitt, N. (2011). Alkali, Zaynab Amina. *African American Studies Center*. doi: 10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.48219. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>15</sup> The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) is an entrance examination board for all Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education in Nigeria. ("Home." Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board. [www.jamb.gov.ng/default](http://www.jamb.gov.ng/default). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

**ER: Everyone has their own path. Sometimes, it's always not direct but you find your way. Could you say a little bit about your engagement in feminist academic work and activism. Do you work with your students? Is there some way that you are involved?**

JA: In a way. We teach feminist discourse<sup>16</sup> and gender studies and in the course of my teaching, some of my students do tell me, "Ma, you're a feminist advocate." I say yes. Because from where I am coming from, from what I've been exposed to through my research, through my readings and all that, I let the girl child, or the female student, or even the male as well, know how the girl child or the woman is being subjugated, oppressed by the society every day, every now and then, and what they could also do to help alleviate these issues in the society. So, I let them know. You know, by teaching in class about feminism, we try to change some patriarchal ideas that have been passed down to them over time. We address these issues in class. They say, "but we can't do anything." I say, no, you can. I'm teaching you right now, you also go out and express these concerns, discuss with your people back home and let them... Can we see it this way and not this way? And in this way, we all lend a voice to change these issues. That's what I do in class. And through my research, I know that students will read and when they read, they will also get some awareness. They will be, in a way, conscientized<sup>17</sup> about these issues.

**ER: So, what courses are you teaching now?**

JA: Phew. Many courses. We're yet to really start something about literature and the environment, but we've started the process. So, I teach theory. I teach Introduction to Literature; I teach African literature: West African, East African, Central African and Southern African. And I also teach The Short Story. We Call it The Short Story.

**ER: That's great. I love African literature. It really is wonderful. Let's see. Could you say something about... You know you said there are various problems in the society...**

JA: I didn't get that.

**ER: The various problems for women in the society. Could you be more explicit about what particular problems when you're discussing with your students?**

JA: You know, you don't discuss outside the text. Probably you're treating a particular text. Let's pick, for example, Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, you get to realize that it captures issues about the girl child struggling in an environment or surrounding that suppresses your

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<sup>16</sup> Discourse, as described by philosopher Michel Foucault, is a particular type of discussion that allows those involved in the discussion to create a set of vocabulary with particular meanings that enhance conversations. ("Discourse." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse>. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

<sup>17</sup> To educate a person about an idea or issue, especially that is social or political in nature. ("conscientize." Wiktionary. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conscientize#English>. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

ambition as a girl. In that light, you find a character who wants to go to school, along the line, there are other issues that crop up.

**ER: Other issues such as?**

JA: Suppression, probably from... You know, from that text, she tells you that the environment is suppressing. Probably, the presence of the father makes her scared. She wants to be free. She wants to be who she wants to be. But the father is always coming out to say--I think the character is Lily--continuously suppresses her. And you hear her saying the environment in my father's house suppresses. Do you get that? Then I think there's the language, there's the patriarchal language I get to understand among the characters where for instance, I will have to say this... There are these young men who went to the forest to cut down the trees, then I love this part, when the young lady got there, she said, "Woah, how long did it take you to cut down all these trees?" And a character, one of the young men said, "It took like five days, which is enough to pay a bride price." I underlined that.

**ER: That's a great connection between the environment and gender.**

JA: You know, I was weak, I was like, felling trees for five days is enough...? That's to tell you how these are the issues to belittle or debase the woman. So, five days cutting down trees is enough to pay my bride price? That's worthless. You're trying to say I'm not worth it. These are the kinds of discussions that go round and round and then for a woman who is not able to get married, you're not really respected. So, there are so many issues that affect the girl child in her environment. Then you keep struggling. I see the struggling in the polygamous<sup>18</sup> setting. All these are issues that affect the woman. The violence that is mitigated against the girl child, probably you're not able to be what society wants you to be. So, these are the issues I'm talking about.

**ER: What about early marriage? Is that a problem or do you see?**

JA: That's still a problem. And you also find that in the text. There's a character - is it Faku? - who couldn't go to school and she was married.

**ER: Is this still in *The Stillborn*?**

JA: Yes. And she was married off and she could not really achieve her dreams because I think when the character later met her in life, she could not see that lively friend she once had; and she wailed inside of her, that if only if she had been able to live her dreams the way she

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<sup>18</sup> A custom of having multiple wives, husbands, or partners at a same time ("Polygamy." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polygamy>. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

wanted. So, these are part of the ills that accompany early girl child marriage. You find that in the text.

**ER: I don't know if there are more recent short stories or novels that talk about the problems. You know, recently in the newspapers, there have been stories about violence between husbands and wives. So, I'm wondering, are there novels that talk about that issue?**

JA: Yes. I think I read *The Hound*<sup>19</sup> by Phebe Jatau<sup>20</sup>. Wow. I think you see a huge brutality against the woman.

**ER: So what exactly did the violence constitute of?**

JA: It was both physical, psychological and all of that. She was brutalized. She kept being brutalized in her pregnant situation by the man. I think at a point, she even lost the baby, she was hospitalized. But an interesting part is that she opted out of the marriage to become who she wanted to be. I think that's the aspect I love about *The Hound*. She opted out of the marriage and took the bulls by the horns to realize her dream after the brutality.

**ER: So, she went to school afterward?**

JA: Yes, she went to school.

**ER: Because you know, in these articles that have been published, they were talking about maybe a woman that would kill her husband, a young young lady who was just desperate. So, the question is, why would a person do that if they could just get divorced.**

JA: If I look at that with what is happening right now... I think there's a text that also reflects something close to that. I think, *Destinies of Life*<sup>21</sup>? She either killed someone or she said

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<sup>19</sup> *The Hound* (2014), written by Phebe Jatau, explores the story of Rebecca, a nine-year-old child who challenges patriarchal constructions of women experiencing poverty, child labor, domestic violence, and discrimination. The novel examines northern Nigerian women's societal burdens from a Christian perspective. (Umar, A.M. (2016). *The Burden of Womanhood: The Role of Northern Nigerian Woman in Family and Nation Building: A Womanist Reading of Veronica Phebe's The Hound* and Rezinat Mohammed's *Habiba*. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>20</sup> Phebe Jatau is a Nigerian academic, author, and Senior Lecturer at Kaduna State University. Jatau received her PhD in Literacy Education from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2010 and a PhD in Literature from Ahmadu Bello University in 2005. Her most prominent novel is titled *The Hound* (2014). ("Jatau, Phebe." LinkedIn. [ng.linkedin.com/in/phebe-jatau/5347b441?challengeId=AQHmyiagvYpXHgAAAXT7lbFRxUAkoIrENCQ3xuUleE47wvPt97pvtMOqfcUalBOG3kOZplPYwdQ\\_RiN8HUI4bUP7dveFLTWIYA&submissionId=8961d9d0-e043-3b16-4158-5a30ff49647b](https://www.linkedin.com/in/phebe-jatau/5347b441?challengeId=AQHmyiagvYpXHgAAAXT7lbFRxUAkoIrENCQ3xuUleE47wvPt97pvtMOqfcUalBOG3kOZplPYwdQ_RiN8HUI4bUP7dveFLTWIYA&submissionId=8961d9d0-e043-3b16-4158-5a30ff49647b). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>21</sup> *Destinies of Life* (2004) is a novel written by Asabe Kabir Usman, which details the modern woman's challenges with gender relations in polygamous settings. The protagonist, Aisha, struggles with her familial relationships, marriage, polygamy and estrangement. (Agofure, J. "Gender and the Arts: A Case of Asabe Kabir Usman's Destinies of Life and Phebe Jatau's *The Hound*." Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

before she killed someone, she opted out of the marriage. *Destinies of Life* by Asabe Kabir Usman<sup>22</sup>.

**ER: Is she in Sokoto<sup>23</sup>?**

JA: Yes, that's the professor. You've met her?

**ER: No, I haven't met her but I know some of her writing.**

JA: She wrote *Destinies of Life*, something about that. With the issue of killing one's spouse, of taking a life, I think that's the height, the peak you're pushed to. I'm not in support of that either, but it's horrible. I don't know.

**ER: Sometimes, I think some of these cases are just spur of the moment, something happens and they are just impetuously<sup>24</sup> done...**

JA: And you suddenly realize, "Oh my God, what have I just done?" But it's too late and they cannot be undone.

**ER: Well, that's great. Those are really important issues for women and that they're being depicted in literature is perfect. So, have you written articles about feminist analysis of novels or women's rights activities somehow?**

JA: I have articles. I wrote something, "Minding the Woman"<sup>25</sup> on Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. I also wrote something on gender and the arts in Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and *The Hound*<sup>26</sup>. I looked at that in those texts. I also looked at woman and the environment in Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *Cobwebs*.

**ER: This is great. I'm really so happy.**

JA: I also wrote one recently that is to be published in one US-based organization. I've forgotten the name right now, I would have told you. It has gone. It has passed the final stage.

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<sup>22</sup> Asabe Kabir Usman attained a PhD in Literature in English at Usmanu DanFodiyo University, Sokoto State. Usman is a professor and researcher of Oral and African Literatures in the Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Nigeria. She is currently the Vice President of the English Scholars Association of Nigeria and the Nigerian Folklore Society. ("Prof. (Mrs) Asabe Kabir." Everipedia. [everipedia.org/wiki/lang\\_en/asabe-kabir](https://everipedia.org/wiki/lang_en/asabe-kabir). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>23</sup> Sokoto is a Northwestern city of Nigeria located near the Sokoto River. ("Sokoto." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokoto>. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>24</sup> In an impulsive manner; without taking cautions ("impetuously." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/impetuously>. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

<sup>25</sup> "Minding the Woman: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*." Joyce Onoromhenre. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Accessed October 10, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Agofure, J. "Gender and the Arts: A Case of Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* and Phebe Jatau's *The Hound*." Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Accessed October 4, 2020.

What I did in that particular book chapter is that I looked at patriarchy and housework in Sefi Atta's<sup>27</sup> *Everything Good Will Come*<sup>28</sup>.

**ER: Ah, that one I have read. I even have a copy. Do you know where the "Minding the Woman" article was published?**

JA: I think 2018. Either 2017 or 2018.

**ER: And what journal? Do you remember the journal?**

JA: Northern Nigerian Literature Journal. I have it there.

**ER: Okay. Maybe I can take a picture of it. And the gender and arts in *Destinies of Life and The Hound*, is that also in the Northern Nigerian Literature Journal?**

JA: No, I think one Bauchi Journal of English and Literary Studies.

**ER: That's great. I'll write down some of the titles of these.**

JA: I can let you have them if I have them. I will check.

**ER: If you have them, I can photograph the pages; you don't need to photocopy. So, what's your understanding of the term 'feminism'? You know, we've talked to different women, across the globe, about their understandings of feminism and that term. So, I'm just wondering, what does it mean to you?**

JA: The moment you just say feminism, you're just talking about women's issues; that's what comes to people's minds. I see it as a conscious struggle to speak for women against every act of sexism that is targeted at them. I see feminism as efforts to liberate the woman socially, educationally, economically and all that. It is that conscious effort to emancipate the woman from patriarchal oppression in the society. That's my view of feminism.

**ER: I think that's a fairly common way of seeing it. That it is for benefitting women to bring about change in the society. So, do you see yourself as a feminist? Or women's' activist?**

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<sup>27</sup> Sefi Atta, born in 1964 in Lagos Nigeria, is a Chartered Accountant in England, a Certified Accountant in the United States, and attained a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Atta has multiple internationally published stage plays and hold several literary awards including the 2009 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. ("Bio." Sefi Atta. [www.sefiatta.com/bio.html](http://www.sefiatta.com/bio.html). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>28</sup> *Everything Good Will Come* (2004), written by Sefi Atta, explores the life of an eleven-year old-girl and her relationship with the girl next door defying traditional Nigerian military rule in 1971. ("Everything Good Will Come." Sefi Atta. [www.sefiatta.com/everything.html](http://www.sefiatta.com/everything.html). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

JA: I see myself as a women's activist. But I won't want to say I'm the radical type. I would want to say I'm a subtle one, or a conservative feminist. That's how I see myself.

**ER: So, a conservative feminist. Maybe they don't go out marching?**

JA: Thank you. I don't do all of that. But through my works, through the group I belong to, I lend a voice to issues affecting women.

**ER: That's a great definition. So, what groups do you belong to then?**

JA: The one that stands out for a feminist organization is the one called 'Arise, O Nigerian Women.'<sup>29</sup>

**ER: And when did that organization start?**

JA: I think 2016? But I actually joined last year. 2017 when I returned.

**ER: What's the program for Arise? It's a national organization?**

JA: From what I see, it's also affiliated to other organizations abroad. Mainly what the group does is to support rural women, to provide them with vocational skills.

**ER: What particularly are your activities involved with that organization.**

JA: That particular organization, we've had conferences, we've had seminars, and we've had this outreach. We've had the opportunity to go into Kaduna<sup>30</sup>, for example, to meet some rural women and in that particular outreach, gifts were offered: wrappers and some foodstuff. It was also an opportunity to have a heart-to-heart conversation with these women because at times, they are looking out for fellow women to pour out their problems. And most of these people are impoverished, highly. So, with those little tokens that we gave them, you should see how they celebrate us. I think, particularly, that's what we've been doing so far. And then, the group also lends a voice to happenings in the society; we look out for people who are less privileged in the society. At times you see people say, "I found this young man and I was able to help him pay school fees." So that's what the group is mainly doing. But they also have those they send abroad for conferences.

**ER: So, is this Arise, O Nigerian Women based in Abuja<sup>31</sup>?**

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<sup>29</sup> Arise O' Nigeria is a United Nations endorsed non-governmental organization based in Nigeria that seeks to empower vulnerable youth and women while promoting peace in Nigeria. ("Home." Arise O' Nigeria. [ariseonigeria.com.ng/](http://ariseonigeria.com.ng/). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>30</sup> Kaduna is the capital city of the Northwestern Kaduna State in Nigeria. ("Kaduna." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaduna>. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>31</sup> Abuja is the capital of Nigeria located in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). ("Abuja." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abuja>. Accessed October 5, 2020.)

JA: Yes, the last symposium we had was in Abuja. I think at the moment, it's in Lagos<sup>32</sup>, but we're trying to get a place, a secretariat in Abuja but I don't know at the moment if that has been settled.

**ER: Okay. But they moved to Abuja. I'm just curious, when you were talking with some of these rural women in Abuja, what were the kinds of things that disturbed them or disturbed you?**

JA: For the one I can still recall... It was about this woman who lamented how she was in a polygamous home and how she was deprived by her husband. She believed she was into a relationship she never planned for and she was highly suppressed. She barely can feed even the children she has and she's being made to have more children and she really needed what to do. And that's when we told her there was a way out; you could go to the hospital, let them tell what to do, the best contraceptives that could help. She was so happy. She never knew. She was going to see a doctor. And I think someone among us volunteered to follow up her issue because she said she was tired of breeding children she won't be able to take care of.

**ER: How many children did she have?**

JA: As at that time, she had seven.

**ER: And he still wanted more. And it was a polygamous marriage? That meant the other wives had many children as well.**

JA: Yes. And they could barely feed. She was so happy. She even told us, if we had wares, old wrappers, anything, we should bring for her. She barely could help herself.

**ER: It's not easy at all. This organization, you think it'll continue then?**

JA: I think so.

**ER: Is it a government program or is it an NGO?**

JA: It's an NGO.

**ER: Okay. Are you part of any other organizations?**

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<sup>32</sup> Lagos is the most populous city of the African continent and financial center of Lagos State, Nigeria. ("Lagos." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos>. Accessed October 4, 2020.)

JA: The other ones I'm into are academic. I'm a Fulbright<sup>33</sup> scholar and I'm also a member of the American Council of Learned Societies<sup>34</sup>. These are the associations I belong to and many others.

**ER: So are you a Fulbright scholar now or you were when you went to the US?**

JA: No. I'm still a fellow.

**ER: So, how does it work? Once you're a fellow, then you're a fellow?**

JA: Yeah.

**ER: Because I was a Fulbright scholar but I don't consider myself...**

JA: Then you're still a fellow! You're still a fellow because I'm still in touch with the embassy. In fact, we're having a conference very soon. April 14th to 17th and that will hold in Osun state<sup>35</sup>. So, it's a continuous program.

**ER: So, what's the conference going to be covering, do you know?**

JA: Yes. And it's an interesting one. It's going to be covering the theme of sexual harassment.

**ER: Great! In your classes, does that come up in any of the literature you're teaching so you can discuss it in your class?**

JA: Issues of sexual harassment?

**ER: Yes.**

JA: I really haven't brought that up in class but I think it is ripe now and we need to talk about it. It's what is going on.

**ER: I think there must be some Nigerian novels that bring up that issue, it seems to me.**

JA: Sexual harassment?

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<sup>33</sup> In 1946, the Fulbright Program was established by Senator J. William Fulbright after introducing legislation to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The Fulbright Scholar Program, which operates in over 160 countries, awards more than 8,000 grants annually to academics and professionals to conduct research. ("History." Fulbright Scholar Program. [www.cies.org/history](http://www.cies.org/history). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>34</sup> The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), established in 1919, is a nonprofit federation of scholarly organizations which represent the United States in the International Union of Academies. ACLS focuses much of its efforts on providing fellowships and grants for scholarly research. ("History." American Council of Learned Societies. [www.acls.org/Our-Work/History](http://www.acls.org/Our-Work/History). Accessed October 5, 2020.)

<sup>35</sup> The modern State of Osun is located in Southwestern Nigeria and was established by colonel Alijiborisa between August 1991 and January 1992. ("About Osun ." State of Osun Government Website. [osun.gov.ng/](http://osun.gov.ng/). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

**ER: Maybe indirectly?**

JA: None I can remember at the moment.

**ER: You know, I think there was one, *From Fatika with Love*<sup>36</sup> by Audee Giwa<sup>37</sup>.**

JA: Oh, yeah! *From Fatika with Love!* But I haven't read that.

**ER: I think that one is about...**

JA: It's a recent one he just published. That was last year?

**ER: No, that was before.**

JA: Oh, there were some others he just published. Is it *Love in the Afternoon*<sup>38</sup>. That's the one I was mixing up.

**ER: Was there anything in that? I know that's one of the topics he addresses.**

JA: I guess that particular text should capture that.

**ER: *Love in the Afternoon*?**

JA: Yes. That one is a very interesting one.

**ER: He's very prolific. So, you're a Fulbright fellow, member of the ACLS; any other organizations that you participate in?**

JA: Literature in Northern Nigeria? These are our normal associations I belong to. But now, I think this is okay. These are the real ones...

**ER: So, this is really interesting because your Fulbright and ACLS are international organizations, How did you come about getting the Fulbright? Don't you have to have a project?**

JA: I did.

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<sup>36</sup> *From Fatika with Love* (2004) is a novel written by Audee Giwa.

<sup>37</sup> Dr. Audee T. Giwa was born on February 2, 1961 in Kaduna State, Nigeria. He holds a B.A. in English, an M.A., and a PhD in Literature from Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. His prominent novels include *I'd Rather Die!* (1994), *Marks on the Run* (2003), and *From Fatika with Love* (2012.) His work focuses on African Literature and Creative Writing. Giwa is currently a Senior Lecturer at Kaduna State University, Kaduna, Nigeria. ("Audee T. Giwa." Kaba Fest. [kabafest.org/guests/audee-t-giwa/](http://kabafest.org/guests/audee-t-giwa/). Accessed October 4, 2020.)

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Audee Giwa revealed his new literary book *Love in the Afternoon*, in February of 2020. Giwa revealed during an event with Kaduna State University (KASU) titled, "Distinguished Author with Dr. Audee Giwa" that the book will "tell a story of love, betrayal, Karma and social awakening." (Yatai, P.D. "KASU Don Unveils 2 Books on Love, Ancestors." NNN. [nnn.ng/kasu-don-unveils-2-books-on-love-ancestors/](http://nnn.ng/kasu-don-unveils-2-books-on-love-ancestors/). Accessed October 5, 2020.)

**ER: What did you tell them?**

JA: I did a project on, an ecocritical study of some selected Nigerians in American Indian poetry. That's what I did. It was a comparative study. I tried to see how issues affecting the environment here in Nigeria: how does it also affect people of the Native American region. I wanted to see how they differ and how they correlate.

**ER: Doing this research for your Fulbright scholarship, did that help you continue with your environmental ecofeminism.**

JA: Yes, it did a lot. In fact, it opened me up to so many things I never knew about the environment. And I worked with a very good advisor who is well grounded in issues about the environment.

**ER: And where was that advisor?**

JA: In Idaho, in the US. University of Idaho<sup>39</sup>. I had the opportunity of going to the wilderness. I had the wilderness experience. I was there for about eight days or so. Cut off from technology. And you see life the way it is, you see nature, you commune with nature, you just discover you're part of nature. It was awesome. And learning to work with scholars, departmental lecturers over there.

**ER: This was in the English department?**

JA: Yes, in the English department. They've actually opened my eyes more, gave me more insight into issues on ecocriticism, the theory of ecocriticism. And through that, I also got to know more about eco-feminism because you're talking about the environment and women.

**ER: Could you say more about eco-feminism because I don't know much about that. What are some of the main objectives of people studying ecofeminism?**

JA: What I see is the ecofeminism gives you insight into how the environment is exploited just as the woman is exploited. They let you know that there is a huge link, a correlation, between the manner in which the environment is exploited and the manner in which the woman is exploited. That is why you see the environment is feminized and the woman is 'naturalized', kind of; in other words...

**ER: Entwined.**

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<sup>39</sup> The University of Idaho, founded in 1889, is a public research university located in Moscow, Idaho. ("About." University of Idaho. [www.uidaho.edu/about](http://www.uidaho.edu/about). Accessed October 5, 2020.)

JA: You use feminine words for the environment and you use words of nature for the woman. You now see the environment like a woman to be drilled. Then you see the woman like nature, to be debased. You don't say, "Why is she talking like a cat? Oh, she looks like cat." You don't see her as who she is, you see her as an animal. Why? You're doing that to discriminate against the woman. Then you see nature as anything feminine to denigrate nature. So, that is ecofeminism. Then it has these long tenets which I can't start to narrate at the moment. It has its poetics. Tenets and poetics which you use in analyzing a text. That is why when I told you about Zainab Alkali's work... For instance, *Cobwebs*; there are two instances I used in that book to discuss ecofeminism. It's a short story. "Ashless Ash"<sup>40</sup>. Even the word itself, it opens you up. And then when you go into that particular story, you'll get to see what is affecting the environment is also affecting the home of a particular character. This is how ecofeminists analyze these issues.

**ER: Okay. We'll look for *Cobwebs*. That would be great. When you were in the US for the Fulbright, did you get any sense that the perspectives of the women you were working within the department, and those you met outside, saw feminism in a different way than those in Nigeria, or had different issues? Or were they the same exactly?**

JA: I did not see it from that perspective, but I was told it also exists. That the struggles, feminist issues are also apparent in the US. I had a friend who told me something and I said, "I didn't notice that." He said, "No, it's there, it's real." Whatever issue is affecting the woman in Africa is also there in the US.

**ER: So, what was the issue?**

JA: He told me that his wife went for an interview, and at the interview, she did very well. She expected to get to the job. They gave a call to the husband, asking him if he gave permission to his wife to look for a job. Are you aware she applied?

**ER: And this was in the US?**

JA: Yes in the US. And the husband said, "Oh my God, my wife applied for a job and she passed. You ought to give her the job but you're calling to seek my opinion? This is not happening in America!" Then he put down the phone.

**ER: Did she get the job?**

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<sup>40</sup> "Saltless Ash" is a short story listed in *The Cobwebs and Other Stories*, a collection of fictional short stories by Zaynab Alkali. (Alkali, Z. (1997). *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (Malthouse African fiction.) Nigeria: Malthouse Press. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

JA: He told her not to go for the job, that he was disappointed. But now, she got a better job. He told me that and I said, "What?" He said yes. They called him and said, "Your wife did very well, are you aware she came for the interview? Do you consent to her?"

**ER: I think in some families, it's not even spoken. A woman won't even go for a job. In some ways, there are similarities in the sense that, at least before, it was the man's responsibility to take care of the wife and the children and the woman stayed in the house and the woman stayed in the house and took care of the children. So, it is not dissimilar. But I think it's changed a lot.**

JA: I think I was 27 then. So, this is pretty recent.

**ER: Any other experiences there that sort of startled you?**

JA: No, not at all. I don't think there are any I can recall. But I was really amazed. I felt women had equal opportunities as the men. Not until he told me this other aspect.

**ER: I thought you were gonna say that she did very well and they offered it someone else who is junior to her, a man.**

JA: Rather, they called the man. "Should we allow your wife have this job?" That kind of thing. So you know, that means she also is not free. You need to get the consent of your husband. So, it's still patriarchal.

**ER: Well, I'm glad she got a better job. Is there anything else you can think of about this ecofeminism because I know one of the women that is involved in this project is really interested, and I love what you were saying about "the environment is feminized, women are naturalized." I don't know if you've seen this book... This is early 1960s sometime, when the feminist movement was just beginning to be expanding. There was a book called *Women are Nature, Men are Culture*<sup>41</sup>?**

JA: There are so many works on ecofeminism, so I can't really remember.

**ER: This wasn't ecofeminism, it wasn't talking specifically about ecofeminism but it was raising that issue that women are associated with the natural world and they are secondary citizens and that men are associated with the culture and are higher. That was the argument and there were different chapters giving examples about how that worked in different societies. I think this was an anthropology text.**

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<sup>41</sup> Agofure may be referring to the influential essay by Sherry B. Ortner called "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" which appeared in a book called *Woman, Culture and Society*, co-edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, and published in 1974 by Stanford University Press. (Ortner, S. (1972). Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture? *Feminist Studies*, 1(2), 5-31. doi:10.2307/3177638. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

JA: I have no idea. What I have come to realize is that the woman is closer to nature by who she is, by her body, the roles she plays in the society, she's a mother, and being a mother, you nurture, and you still see that playing out when it comes to the environment. She wants to nurture a plant and you see this huge connection. She's not really concerned about going there to chop it off. She wants to nurture. By the reason of her nature, she is the center of nature itself; by carrying the progeny<sup>42</sup>, she carries in her womb, she nurtures in her womb. But you can't say that of the man, really. So, I think what ecofeminists are trying to say is that the woman is closer to nature more than the man. She aligns with nature more and they try to see this link that by the reason of her features, her body, she aligns with nature more than that of the man. The man, though he does, not really. He's concerned about what he's going to take from nature.

**ER: You know, that's interesting because... This is actually another anthropologist. He was arguing that women can give birth, they have so many abilities that men can't do and therefore men are actually jealous of women's ability to bear children, and that close relationship between women and their children, women and nature, that they don't have it and so that's one of the reasons they want to suppress women. Because they're jealous. At least that's what he was arguing.**

JA: I think that's still part of it.

**ER: Okay. If there's any other issues. Do you have any questions for me or comments about the project?**

JA: We kept bothering (her husband) Mallam. What's it about? You mean someone just came and wants to interview? What is it about? We wanted to be sure. I said this is a grant, so what is about really? He said, it's from Michigan and started explaining. I said, fine. Let me just do my own, that's why I'm in academia. I think I have a colleague who said she wasn't comfortable, but I said I would go ahead with it. Probably, I could lend a voice. That's my calling. So, I decided to go ahead with it.

**ER: We really thank you because it's so important to have different voices. We have a medical doctor, we have a lawyer, we have a secondary school administrator - one from Abuja, one is from Kano<sup>43</sup>. Then here in ABU, we have somebody in Gender Studies; now we have somebody in Literature, so we have a real range and it will be so interesting for students. So, this will be on the web, internationally, so you'll be able to see yourself. We really thank you, Global Feminisms Project, for speaking to us.**

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<sup>42</sup> A descendant or offspring of a person, animal or plant. ("progeny." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/progeny>. Accessed October 10, 2020.)

<sup>43</sup> Kano is located in Northwest Nigeria and is the capital of Kano State. ("Kano." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kano>. Accessed October 5, 2020.)