

# The Domination of Mother Earth, Gender-Based Violence, and the (Dis)Ease of Eve

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## SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

The misuse of religious texts, particularly the Genesis creation story, has historically been used to justify the exploitation of both the Earth and women. This justification, rooted in patriarchal interpretations of scripture, has led to environmental degradation and gender-based violence (GBV) and disproportionately affected marginalized communities, especially women of color. This article examines the interconnectedness of these issues, exploring how the domination of "Mother Earth" and the subjugation of women are intertwined. By analyzing the historical context, religious interpretations, and societal structures that perpetuate these forms of violence, this article aims to shed light on the urgent need for an intersectional approach to address both environmental destruction and GBV. Through a critical examination of the "(Dis)ease of Eve", this article challenges traditional narratives and seeks to reclaim the power and agency of women, particularly women of the African Diaspora, in the fight for a more just and sustainable future.

## KEYWORDS

African Diaspora, Christianity, Ecology, GBV, Intersectionality, Mother Earth

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## INTRODUCTION

The exploitation and abuse of women and the Earth have been deeply intertwined throughout history, often justified and perpetuated through the manipulation of religious texts and patriarchal interpretations. This interconnected violence, rooted in a dominator mindset, has manifested in environmental degradation, gender-based violence (GBV), and the marginalization of vulnerable communities, particularly women of color. This article delves into the historical and ongoing ramifications of this interconnected violence, exploring how the subjugation of “Mother Earth” mirrors and reinforces the oppression of women.

The Christian Doctrine of Discovery, stemming from a specific interpretation of Genesis, has played a pivotal role in legitimizing the exploitation of both people and the environment. This doctrine, rooted in a patriarchal worldview, has been used to justify colonization, resource extraction, and the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems. The objectification of nature as something to be conquered and controlled has paved the way for environmental destruction, including deforestation, pollution, and climate change. Simultaneously, this dominator mindset has fueled the subjugation of women, who have historically been viewed as part of the natural world, as things to be dominated and controlled by men. This patriarchal ideology has manifested in various forms of GBV, from physical and sexual abuse to economic exploitation and the denial of reproductive rights.

The consequences of this interconnected violence are far-reaching and devastating. Environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women, who frequently experience the worst effects of climate change, such as food insecurity, water scarcity, and displacement. Moreover, the exploitation of natural resources often

leads to conflict and instability, further exacerbating GBV and creating a vicious cycle of violence and oppression. By examining the historical context, religious interpretations, and societal structures that perpetuate this interconnected violence, this article aims to expose the urgent need for an intersectional approach to address both environmental destruction and GBV. Through a critical analysis of the “(dis)ease of Eve,” this article challenges traditional narratives and seeks to reclaim the power and agency of women in the fight for a more just and sustainable future.

## MOTHER EARTH

The command of God to Adam and Eve in Gen. 1:28-30 to have domination over creatures is problematic. In its original Hebrew, domination is a harsh word. It is to tame and control the forces of nature that are destructive and violent. Taken in isolation and purely in this context, that word gives a basis for a ruthless exploitation of nature.<sup>1</sup>

Mother Earth is our life force, essential for our existence. In the Black/African American community, mothers are considered sacred, providing life and nourishment. This concept extends to Mother Earth, who, like chlorophyll, can heal and restore humanity. Healing varies across species and communities. The term “Mother” encompasses various roles, from biological to adopted parents and caregivers. While Mother Earth sustains us, many humans harm her and each other.

Similarly, Mother Africa is yet another origin of landmasses: “Geographically, about 175,000,000 years ago, we find Africa at the center of the original supercontinent, a conglomerate land mass some geologists refer to as Pangaea, that places Africa in the center of the earth’s four quadrants or all four hemispheres”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is similarly considered as the origin of humankind on Earth:

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<sup>1</sup> K. C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives on Mission*, 1st ed. (Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> L. H. Welchel, Jr, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 2.

When tracing our African roots, we arrive at this inescapable conclusion: Out of Africa came all entries into the world. She is the [M]other of all that from which or in which or on which continent the human race, human civilization, and the foundations of religion were conceived and delivered into the world. Mother Africa is the term used to describe Africa and the “matrix” or “womb” from which all else concerning humanity developed.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence of her people’s ancient travels exists worldwide, including pyramids and artefacts. However, Africa’s dominance ended with Hannibal’s defeat by the Romans, leading to European colonization and the suppression of African people, culture, and history.<sup>4</sup> This loss put Africa and her people on a new trajectory, one that saw European colonization of her lands, her people, sacred ways of life, their Deities, history, and her-stories.

## **The Doctrine of Discovery and Domination of Mother Earth**

The Christian Doctrine of Discovery, rooted in a specific interpretation of Genesis, has historically been used to justify the exploitation of people and the environment and continues to have detrimental effects today. The Discovery Doctrine and subsequent papal decrees issued in the 15th century granted European Christian nations the right to claim and exploit non-Christian lands and people. This doctrine stemmed from a particular understanding of the Genesis creation story that emphasized human dominion over nature. Specifically, Gen. 1:28-30 provides humankind with wisdom and responsibilities:

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” <sup>29</sup>God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the Earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup>And every beast of the Earth, and to everything that creeps on the Earth,

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<sup>3</sup> Whelchel, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974), 118–19.

everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

This analysis will not delve into the ongoing scholarly debates surrounding the interpretation of Genesis 1 and its implications for humanity’s responsibility towards the environment and its inhabitants.

The Doctrine of Discovery led to the colonization of Africa and the Americas that also led to the enslavement and commercial exploitation of the indigenous populations.<sup>5</sup> According to Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature*, “as the economy became modernized and the Scientific Revolution proceeded, the dominion metaphor spread beyond the religious sphere and assumed ascendancy in the social and political spheres as well”.<sup>6</sup> It also fueled the objectification and exploitation of women, who were often seen as part of the natural world to be conquered.<sup>7</sup> Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva, Rosemary Ruether, and Val Plumwood argue that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected and religious texts have often been misused to justify both.<sup>8</sup> This perspective challenges the dominant anthropocentric and patriarchal worldview that has fueled environmental destruction and calls for a rethinking of our relationship with nature and a dismantling of oppressive systems.

The repercussions of the Doctrine of Discovery are still felt today. Environmental degradation, including global warming and resource

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<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Values Initiative, “Dum Diversas,” Doctrine of Discovery, July 23, 2018, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/>; The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “The Doctrine of Discovery, 1493,” accessed May 26, 2024, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-of-discovery-1493>; Webfeller, “Romanus Pontifex (Granting the Portuguese a Perpetual Monopoly in Trade with Africa) January 8, 1455,” *Papal Encyclicals Online* (blog), June 16, 2017, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/nichol05/romanus-pontifex.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, Reprint (New York: HarperOne, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Sally Roesch-Wagner, “Christian Control of Women and Mother Earth: The Doctrine of Discovery And The Doctrine of Male Domination,” *Doctrine of Discovery* (blog), April 8, 2023, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/blog/christian-control-women-mother-earth/>.

<sup>8</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Rosemary R. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1994); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

depletion, can be linked to the exploitative mindset it fosters. According to Maarten K. van Aalst, “the impacts of climate change on natural disasters,[and] the increase in greenhouse gases” are a precursor to global warming, and will lead to more droughts, tropical cyclones and floods.<sup>9</sup> Van Aalst reports a direct correlation between an increase between global climate changes and anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions over the last twenty years.<sup>10</sup> Another striking example is that 40% of the world’s population suffers from water scarcity due to a lack of transboundary agreements, which is likely to increase in the future.

Furthermore, the doctrine’s legacy continues to impact legal decisions, as evidenced by its use in a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case to deny land rights to the Oneida Indian Nation.<sup>11</sup> This concept has had a substantial impact on the formation of our connection with the environment and indigenous peoples. Understanding both the historical and ongoing impact is crucial to address contemporary issues such as climate change and indigenous rights.

## **Epidemics and the Earth Crisis**

Climate change and environmental degradation, particularly in Latin America, disproportionately affect women and can contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, potentially leading to global pandemics. It is these immediate and tangible consequences of “forced development or modernization projects” that feminists in the Global South prioritize over the more abstract and long-term threat of climate change. These projects displace women and have troubling effects on their livelihoods, particularly in Latin America concerning food production.<sup>12</sup> When the effects of environmental degradation lead to drought, food production is severely impacted, and public health epidemics reemerge.

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<sup>9</sup> Maarten K. Van Aalst, “The Impacts of Climate Change on the Risk of Natural Disasters,” *Disasters* 30, no. 1 (March 2006): 5–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2006.00303.x>.

<sup>10</sup> Van Aalst, “The Impacts of Climate Change,” 5–18.

<sup>11</sup> Roesch-Wagner, “Christian Control of Women And Mother Earth.”

<sup>12</sup> Melissa Moreano Venegas, Miriam Lang, and Gabriela Ruales-Jurado, “Climate Justice from the Perspective of Latin American and Other Southern Feminisms,” *Fundación Rosa Luxemburg Oficina Región Andina* October, no. No. 20 (October 2021): 32.

Research suggests that global deforestation, another symptom of earth degradation, may lead a worldwide pandemic. In their article, Tulio de Oliveira and Houriiyah Tegally argue that the connection between climate change, earth degradation such as deforestation, and infectious disease has been grossly overlooked.<sup>13</sup> They contend that the displacement of humans, wildlife, insects and rodents due to climate change and the resultant natural disasters, such as floods and heatwaves, will spread pandemic-level infectious diseases to the human population. Coupled with rapid international travel, this type of disease could circulate the globe in hours.

## Earth Crisis Theories and Perspectives

Contemporary scholarship on climate change is evolving to incorporate diverse perspectives, challenging traditional narratives, and highlighting the disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, particularly Black women and African Americans. The reviewed texts offer a multi-faceted exploration of climate change discourse. Rahman traces the evolution of the conversation, noting a shift towards anthropocentric terminology while overlooking colonial implications.<sup>14</sup> Chisale advocates for an African women-centered approach to eco-theology, distinct from existing ecowomanist and ecofeminist frameworks.<sup>15</sup> Davidson and da Silva introduce a Black social thought perspective that confronts environmental collapse as an enduring reality rather than a redemptive event.<sup>16</sup> Thomas, through an Afro-Gothic lens, examines the Flint water crisis as an instance of domestic eco-terrorism, highlighting the intersection of environmental and human rights struggles rooted in the Black Atlantic experience. Together, these works

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<sup>13</sup> Tulio de Oliveira and Houriiyah Tegally, "Will Climate Change Amplify Epidemics and Give Rise to Pandemics?," *Science* 381, no. 6660 (August 25, 2023): eadk4500, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adk4500>.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Ishaq-ur Rahman, "Climate Change: A Theoretical Review," *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.7906/indecs.11.1.1>.

<sup>15</sup> Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale and Rozelle Robson Bosch, eds., "When Women and Earth Connect: African Ecofeminist or Ecowomanist Theology?," in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology*, vol. 10, HTS Religion & Society Series (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2021), 9–17, <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2021.BK237.01>.

<sup>16</sup> Joe P. L. Davidson and Filipe Carreira da Silva, "Fear of a Black Planet: Climate Apocalypse, Anthropocene Futures and Black Social Thought," *European Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 4 (November 1, 2022): 521–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211067980>.

contribute to a growing body of literature that seeks to decolonize and diversify climate change discourse.<sup>17</sup>

## **What are creative responses to environmental degradation?**

Creative responses to environmental degradation include recognizing and harnessing the emotional impact of ecological awareness (eco-anxiety) and valuing the untapped reservoir of knowledge held by Indigenous communities, offering potential pathways towards mitigation and adaptation. Charlie Kurth and Panu Pihkala discuss the importance of more research to learn how people are living with “eco-anxiety”, which they see as related to living with knowledge of environmental degradation. In the co-authored article, “Eco-anxiety: What it is and why it matters”, Kurth and Pihkala propose possible positive outcomes from recognizing eco-anxiety, seeing it as a sign of “moral attunement” with the implication that this may lead to more personal accountability for minimizing the human contributions to climate change.<sup>18</sup>

Lilian C. Siwila contends that “every form of knowledge, be it oral or written, needs to be recognized as truth that can be used in response to climate change” when interacting with the indigenous knowledge found within African societies. In her article, “An African Ecofeminist Appraisal of the Value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Responding to Environmental Degradation and Climate Change”, Siwila argues that Indigenous people have faced “environmental destruction using their indigenous knowledge systems” and are an “untapped library” that has been overlooked in the search for ways to address environmental degradation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tashima Thomas, “An Ecocritical Look at Flint’s Water Crisis and Afro-Gothic Liquidity,” *Liquid Blackness* 6, no. 2 (October 1, 2022): 38–59, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-9930283>.

<sup>18</sup> Charlie Kurth and Panu Pihkala, “Eco-Anxiety: What It Is and Why It Matters,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (September 23, 2022): 981814, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.981814>.

<sup>19</sup> Lilian Siwila, “An African Ecofeminist Appraisal of the Value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Responding to Environmental Degradation and Climate Change,” in *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022), 65–78, [https://www.academia.edu/93460679/An\\_African\\_ecofeminist\\_appraisal\\_of\\_the\\_value\\_of\\_indigenous\\_knowledge\\_systems\\_in\\_responding\\_to\\_environmental\\_degradation\\_and\\_climate\\_change](https://www.academia.edu/93460679/An_African_ecofeminist_appraisal_of_the_value_of_indigenous_knowledge_systems_in_responding_to_environmental_degradation_and_climate_change).



## Ecological Connections to GBV

The exploitation of both women and the Earth, historically justified by religious interpretations like the Doctrine of Discovery, has far-reaching consequences. Environmental degradation, fueled by this exploitative mindset, disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women. This degradation exacerbates existing inequalities and contributes to the spread of infectious diseases and potential pandemics. As we confront the intensifying climate crisis, it is imperative to acknowledge these interconnected injustices and amplify the voices of those most affected, particularly Black women and indigenous communities, in shaping sustainable solutions.

## Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems, religious interpretations, and historical injustices, disproportionately affects women and girls, necessitating an intersectional approach that considers the intertwined nature of various oppressions while focusing on community healing, individual agency, and empowerment to dismantle these harmful structures. It manifests in multiple forms of abuse, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic, and can occur in both public and private spheres.<sup>20</sup>

This violence is further compounded by intersectional factors such as race, class, and gender identity, creating unique vulnerabilities and barriers to accessing justice and support for marginalized groups. For instance, transwomen of color often face additional bias and discrimination, hindering their access to protection and resources.<sup>21</sup> A womanist lens of GBV emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context, the role of intersectionality, and the significance of community healing and empowerment for survivors. A comprehensive approach is needed to tackle

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Loyseau, "Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)," UNHCR Israel, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/il/en/protection/sexual-and-gender-based-violence-sgbv>.

<sup>21</sup> "United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally 2022," 2022 Update (U.S. Department of State, 2022), 8, <https://www.state.gov/reports/united-states-strategy-to-prevent-and-respond-to-gender-based-violence-globally-2022/>.

structural disparities and empower individuals to dismantle the systems that perpetuate violence against women and girls.

## **The Root of Gender-Based Violence**

Religious texts can have a complex impact on GBV. While many teachings advocate for love and respect, specific interpretations have been misused to justify violence against women across various religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, where passages from sacred texts or religious traditions have been twisted to support patriarchal control and male dominance. In the Christian context, one such example is Ephesians 5:22–24, which instructs wives to submit to their husbands, often allowing for situations of GBV and unequal treatment in the marriage to occur. In the Qur'an 4:34 it states, "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth".<sup>22</sup> This sacred text suggests that women are devoutly obedient to their husbands.

However, not to honor the role of the husband can have consequences such as the withholding of sex, striking, and other forms of physical violence. In the Hindu faith tradition, legal texts justified the subjugation of women to male authority from birth to death. Thus, within a hierarchal gender relationship, violence against women is considered the norm. In the Judaism tradition, Old Testament scriptures include displays of GBV, such as in Genesis 19:8. Misinterpretations of these texts can then manifest in harmful practices like that of honor killings, victim-blaming, and the silencing of survivors. In addition, they perpetuate inequality by denying women education and financial autonomy, consequently trapping them in abusive situations.

To counter these harmful interpretations, women religious scholars are reinterpreting texts to uncover overlooked perspectives and emphasize a holistic understanding that upholds the equality and dignity of all individuals. They advocate for the application of the universal principle of the Golden Rule, that is treating others with compassion and respect, and using human rights as a guiding framework to challenge discriminatory beliefs and

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<sup>22</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1998), 57.

policies. By promoting interpretations based in equality and prioritizing human rights, religious communities can actively work towards dismantling the harmful structures contributing to GBV and fostering a more equitable and just society for all.

## **Patriarchal Roots and the Historical Oppression of Women**

At the core of violence against women is the patriarchy, a system of male domination based on perceived male superiority. This historical influence permeates religious practices, cultural norms, and societal expectations regarding women's roles, often normalizing violence against them as an expression of male control. The United Nations defines violence against women broadly, encompassing physical, sexual, and psychological harm, threats, coercion, and deprivation of liberty occurring in both public and private spheres.

Moreover, the unique experiences of Black women in the Americas illustrate the intersection of GBV and systemic racism, slavery, and colonization. Addressing GBV requires acknowledging and dismantling these social injustices to achieve meaningful change. Patricia Hill Collins argues:

The experiences of women of color have been shaped and constrained by unique barriers, stemming from the combined effects of racial, ethnic, and gender bias. As a result, they have faced dehumanizing racial and ethnic stereotypes that have devalued their worth, oversexualized their bodies, and fueled a societal hierarchy that too often has deemed them as not measuring up to the perceived feminine superiority of white women.<sup>23</sup>

## **The Intersectional Nature of Gender-Based Violence**

An intersectional lens reveals that GBV is intrinsically linked to other forms of oppression, including racism, classism, ableism, and more. This framework highlights how these various oppressions converge and amplify the prevalence, nature, and societal response to violence. Women's experiences of violence are not uniform but, rather, are shaped by their

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

diverse intersecting identities. Transgender women of color, for instance, encounter unique obstacles in accessing support services compared to cisgender white women.

Individuals facing multiple oppressions often experience more severe and frequent violence due to the cumulative impact of these inequalities. For example, women with disabilities face compounded disadvantages due to income inequality and discrimination. Additionally, language barriers, cultural stigmas, and systemic discrimination hinder access to essential resources for many survivors. By understanding the complex interplay of intersectionality and GBV, we can develop more nuanced, inclusive, and practical strategies to prevent violence and support survivors across diverse communities and identities.

## **Community and Healing**

Ending GBV requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes that recognizes women's equality and values their contributions. Addressing GBV necessitates acknowledging the strength and resilience of survivors while providing comprehensive support networks and culturally-relevant resources and promoting self-care practices. Healing from the trauma of GBV necessitates trauma-informed approaches in support services that are sensitive to the unique needs of each survivor. Creating brave and safe spaces allows survivors to feel validated, empowered, and in control of their healing journey.

Holistic healing practices are essential to addressing the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of survivors. Integrating mental health support, art therapy, meditation, yoga, and other modalities can cater to the individual needs of each survivor. Community-based networks, such as peer support groups and survivor-led initiatives, foster connection and solidarity among survivors. These networks provide invaluable resources, validation, and a sense of belonging that facilitates healing and recovery.

## **Empowering Women's Agency to Combat GBV**

To dismantle the deeply entrenched social injustices that perpetuate GBV, it is crucial to empower women by equipping them with the tools to recognize the subtle and overt practices, symptoms, and systemic forces that enable this violence. Amplifying women's voices, centering their experiences, and

fostering their leadership are essential to developing practical solutions and strategies to combat GBV. This violence comprises of more than physical abuse, including sexual assault, emotional manipulation, economic exploitation, and other forms of harm that reinforce patriarchal power structures as well. Dismantling GBV necessitates a multi-faceted approach that integrates activism, community engagement, policy reform, and cultural transformation. Through the acts of questioning and destroying the fundamental systems that sustain acts of violence towards women, we can establish a society in which all individuals can flourish without experiencing fear or injury.

## THE (DIS)EASE OF EVE

<sup>26</sup>Let us make Adam in our image, according to our likeness;  
<sup>27</sup>...male and female [the Divine] created them. <sup>28</sup>God blessed them... <sup>31</sup>God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:26-27, 31)

I am the Mother<sup>24</sup> of land and humankind, stripped from the memories of many of my children, many of whom still seek me! Only to discover I am already within them. I did not leave you. I am in your DNA. I am the hurricanes that leaves the coast of West Africa, following the paths of the ships that took your African forebears. Children do not cry; do not fear. I cry because you are the light, so shine bright. I am wisdom, the oceans blue, the Mother Land, and I am Mother, Africa.

When the Earth was only one landmass, Pangea<sup>25</sup>, the continent now known as Africa was at the center, of all other landmasses (her children): North America, Central America, South America, Antarctica, Australia, and the peninsular formation of Asia currently known as Europe. Each shifted and moved away from Africa.<sup>26</sup> Geneticists, archaeologists, and paleontologists have confirmed that modern humans originated in Africa. Studies of

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<sup>24</sup> Mother is capitalized to denote the honor and sacredness and to hold and reclaim Black women's significance in history, to our families, our communities, to one another, and to ourselves. Mother is not limited to those that have given birth, includes those that have protected, helped, and uplifted others and our communities.

<sup>25</sup> "What Was Pangea?" U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), accessed May 24, 2024, <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-was-pangea#>.

<sup>26</sup> Wheelchel, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 2.

mitochondrial DNA support this conclusion. Geneticist L. Luca Cavalli-Forza also found that Africans exhibit the greatest genetic diversity among any human group, further supporting the idea that Africa is the cradle of humankind.<sup>27</sup>

She brought forth Eve, Mother of All Living (Genesis 3:20)<sup>28</sup>, including Black women in the Diaspora. Thus, as an African American, a Black woman, a descendant of Enslaved Ancestors from the Mother Land, an African ascendant<sup>29</sup> from the Igbo people of Nigeria, the Mbundu people in Angola, the Temne people of Sierra Leone, the Tsogo people in Gabon, and ancient people of Ancient Near East, the lands that are currently identified as the Middle East, the first recorded GBV via spiritual-abuse and pandemic, occurs in the traditional (mis)interpretation of the Biblical text, Genesis 3, the Fall narrative, and the (dis)ease of Eve.

## **I Am Eve, and This Is My Story**

I am Not your Whore! I am Not your Bitch! I am Not Angry! I am Not Common! I am Not the originator of Sin! These labels do women, in particular contemporary Black women<sup>30</sup> a disservice, are disturbing, and do not reflect who Black women are or who I am. I am a Black woman! An African American<sup>31</sup> woman! An African woman, I am The Mother of All Living! I am Eve! And this is my story!<sup>32</sup>

The narrative of Eve as the “sin catalyst” in the Garden of Eden, referred to here as the “(Dis)ease of Eve”, requires a critical reevaluation of Genesis 3 through both a historical and cultural lens. Biases and inconsistencies within

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<sup>27</sup> Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers* (San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Michael C. Campbell and Sarah A. Tishkoff, “The Evolution of Human Genetic and Phenotypic Variation in Africa,” *Current Biology* 20, no. 4 (February 23, 2010): R166–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2009.11.050>.

<sup>29</sup> See definition of “African ascendant” in the section “Genesis 3” of this article.

<sup>30</sup> For this essay, Black women, are contemporary women with black skin, an African ascendant (see footnote 5), who are impacted by the Eve story.

<sup>31</sup> African American women and Black women who are direct descendants of free Blacks or Blacks held in bondage in the United States of America during the 1400s – 1860s.

<sup>32</sup> Burdette Lowe, “Rev. Burdette Lowe, ‘The Domination of Mother Earth, Gender-Based Violence, and the Dis-Ease of Eve’, co-authored paper presented at Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Sixth Pan-African Conference, Ghana, West Africa, July 1-5, 2024.

Western education and historical narratives demand a closer examination of the information presented as factual. This section of the article delves into Christianity, Genesis 3, and the “(Dis)ease of Eve” from historical and theological perspectives, challenging the traditional Western portrayal of Eve, Black women, and women in general as the originators of “sin.”

Merlin Stone aptly observes that “[t]he image of Eve, created for her husband, from her husband, the woman who was supposed to have brought the downfall of humankind, has in many ways become the image of all women”.<sup>33</sup> This article argues that the “(Dis)ease of Eve”, the perceived imbalance introduced into the world, stems from the misrepresentation of a sacred female figure. Traditionally, Eve is often depicted as a non-melanated female, despite interpretations of biblical and historical texts that suggest otherwise.<sup>34</sup> This racialized portrayal contributes to the marginalization of Black women and reinforces harmful stereotypes about women in general. Scientists reluctantly call the common maternal ancestor of all humans “Eve” because the name has misleading connotations. This Eve was likely a black-skinned woman who lived in Africa 200,000 years ago. DNA evidence traces all humans back to her. Moreover, Africa is the only place with evidence of humans living over a million years ago, as evidenced by the 3-million-year-old Lucy skeleton.<sup>35</sup>

In her work *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum in alignment with scholars from various nations presenting at a 1999 symposium “Arte preistorica e tribale. Decifrare le immagini,” the XVII Valcamonica Symposium, held September 21 to 26 in Darfo Boario Terme, Italia, affirm the African Eve theory of human origins<sup>36</sup>:

At the beginning of the third millennium, world scientists are in agreement on the african [sic] origin of modern humans—homo

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<sup>33</sup> Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), xi.

<sup>34</sup> For example, some scholars argue that the Hebrew word for Eve, “Havvah,” is connected to the word for “life” or “living,” suggesting a connection to African origins where life was believed to originate. Additionally, early Christian art often depicts Eve as a Black woman.

<sup>35</sup> Tierney John, “The Search for Adam & Eve: Scientists Explore a Controversial Theory About Man’s Origins,” *Newsweek* 111, no. 2 (January 11, 1988): 46.

<sup>36</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, 28.

sapiens.<sup>2</sup> Although not adequately disseminated in popular understanding, there is almost no resistance in the scholarly world to acknowledging african origins of humans. Resistance to accepting a dark african woman as the oldest mother we know remains, however, in the scholarly world.<sup>37</sup>

Lupita Nyong'o, a Kenyan actress known for her roles in several U.S. films, including the 2019 blockbuster movie *Black Panther*, is said to be a direct descendant of the first female. In a 2020 episode of the U.S. television show, "Finding You Roots", Nyong'o was informed by Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. that she is genetically linked directly to the oldest DNA maternal haplogroup, Mitochondrial Eve. This means she is a direct descendant of the African woman from whom humankind originated.<sup>38</sup>

Although it is well-known in scholarly realms that human civilization existed in Africa well over 200,000 years ago, Africa's importance as the "Mother" of all lands and humanity is not commonly known. Africa's identity has become polluted with misconception, misinformation, distortions, and false conclusions. Eve must be reclaimed and allowed her proper cultural identity.

### **Genesis 3**

Disease, a state of imbalance or disharmony within the body, can be likened to discomfort or unease. Yet, negativity has been unjustly associated with Eve, and many individuals, including Christians, have been conditioned to view her as the source of this dis-ease, namely "sin" or deception, rather than focusing on the remedy: truth.<sup>39</sup> While the concepts of good and evil are present in Genesis 2:9, the term "sin" is notably absent in Genesis 3. According to African theologian John Mbiti, this concept was unknown in pre-colonial African societies. He states:

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<sup>37</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, 3; Also see Birnbaum's footnote (28) and symposium paper, "Converging Interpretations of Prehistoric Signs for Woman". 28.

<sup>38</sup> Kizzi Asala, "Africa Is the Root of Humankind," *Africa News*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/12/01/lupita-nyong-o-s-dna-confirms-humankind-was-born-of-an-african-woman/>.

<sup>39</sup> Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, xii.



There is no original sin in African religion [sacred ways of life], neither is a person born a sinner. A person is a sinner by deed in the context of a community of which the person is a member. Sinning is that which injures the philosophical principle of 'I am because you are, and since we are. Therefore, I am.'<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, ancient Babylonians revered their female ancestors, even deifying them, which is in stark contrast to the Western condemnation of Eve.<sup>41</sup> Black Africans, both female and male, and their ascendants possess a rich history spanning over 500,000 years. Before European colonization and the ensuing dehumanization, they were viewed as sacred entities, deeply connected to nature and the cosmos.<sup>42</sup> The term "African ascendant" was created by Kohain Hahlevi to emphasize the forward-moving nature of people of African heritage, rather than "descendant" that implies a backward movement. This term encourages a change in how we discuss African identity and highlights the need to address the lack of knowledge about African history and Diaspora in society and education.<sup>43</sup> Historically, Black women held positions of power and authority, as did Black men. However, dominant Western narratives, often Eurocentric and non-African in perspective, have obscured this reality. The foundation of humanity lies in the rich heritage of Black women and men, rooted in the African continent. Despite this, the Genesis 3 narrative of the Garden of Eden, or "The Fall", has been frequently misinterpreted and weaponized to explain, blame, and justify negative behaviors and circumstances in human lives.

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<sup>40</sup> John Mbiti, "God, Sin, and Salvation in African Religion," in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center | The First Pan-African Christian Church Conference, July 17-23*, ed. Wilmore Gayraud et al. (Atlanta, GA: The ITC Press, 1988), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, xii.

<sup>42</sup> Jarita Holbrook, "Celestial Women of Africa," *The Cultural History of the Universe*, June 30, 2020, 18; Mama Zogbé, *The Sibyls: Demystifying the Absence of the African Ancestress: The First Prophetess of Mami (Wata)* (Martinez, GA: Mami Wata Healers Society of North America Incorporated, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Chinwe L. Okpalaoka and Cynthia B. Dillard, "(Im)Migrations, Relations, and Identities of African Peoples: Toward an Endarkened Transnational Feminist Praxis in Education," *Journal of Educational Foundations* 26, no. 1–2 (Winter-Spring 2012): 122.

The prevailing narrative of Eve as the originator of sin, which contradicts the earlier assertion in Genesis 1:31 that all of creation, including Black people, were deemed “good” by the Deity raises critical questions for Christians. This erroneous narrative, akin to a disease, has caused a pandemic of falsehoods, perpetuating harm against Mother Africa, her people on the continent, the African Diaspora, and all of humanity.

The misinterpretation of Eve’s story in Genesis 3 has spread globally, analogous to a pandemic. This “pandemic of falsehoods”, as coined by Kelly Heath, has been perpetuated by Western Christianity<sup>44</sup> and has had devastating consequences for Africa and its Diaspora.<sup>45</sup> This widespread misinformation, known as mythomania or pathological lying, has been used as a tool of oppression, particularly through the manipulation of Christianity. While Christianity can be seen as the source of this problem, it also holds potential solutions to this global issue. The distortion of Eve’s story served political purposes during the European colonization of Africa, aligning with the colonizers’ aim to establish Christianity as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

## **Christianity**

The canonization of the Bible and the establishment of Western Christianity were both ushered in by the Roman emperor, Constantine, who made Christianity the recognized religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>46</sup> While Christianity has its roots in African spirituality,<sup>47</sup> it was influenced by political and economic motives, shaping the doctrines and interpretations of sacred texts. The doctrine of the “Original Sin”, attributed to Eve, became

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<sup>44</sup> Don Vaughan, “What Is the Most Widely Practiced Religion in the World?,” *Britannica | History & Society*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-the-most-widely-practiced-religion-in-the-world>.

<sup>45</sup> Kelly Heath, “The Classical Definition of a Pandemic Is Not Elusive,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 89, no. 7 (July 1, 2011): 540–41, <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.11.088815>; Miguel Porta, ed., *A Dictionary of Epidemiology*, Sixth (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26: The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, Electronic, vol. 1A (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 229.

<sup>47</sup> David T. Adamo, “Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (October 31, 2011): 10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v32i1.285>.

widespread in the 4th century as a result of Saint Augustine's interpretations, consequently justifying harmful actions against marginalized groups. John Mbiti argues that the concept of sin in African religions is not about inherent guilt but, rather, about actions that harm the community,<sup>48</sup> challenging the traditional Western narrative and prompting a reinterpretation of Eve's role in Genesis 3.

Exploring ancient Egyptian culture, writings, and history provides an alternative perspective on Eve. Long before Christianity, ancient Kemet, or KMT (Egypt), encompassed much of North Africa and was considered part of the Ancient Near East (presently called the Middle East and extending into modern-day Asia and Europe). In this society, Black women held esteemed positions, even as Pharaohs, and were often considered as wisdom personified. Hatshepsut, for example, was a female Pharaoh (Living Horus), who ruled Egypt successfully.<sup>49</sup>

In the Bible, the book of Proverbs 1:1-3, 20 discusses wisdom as the female aspect of humanity:

<sup>1</sup>The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: <sup>2</sup>For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, <sup>3</sup> for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteous, justice, and equity...<sup>20</sup> Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.

In ancient Kemetian traditions, serpents often symbolized wisdom and divinity. This raises intriguing questions about Eve's ability to communicate with the serpent in Genesis 3 while Adam could not. Could it be that Eve, as the Mother of All Living, possessed divine wisdom herself? Ancient Egyptian culture, which was closely intertwined with Hebrew traditions, offers an alternative understanding whereby serpents were revered as divine, wise,

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<sup>48</sup> Mbiti, "God, Sin, and Salvation," 63–64; Burdette Lowe, "Pharaoh Let My People Go, Christianity Is Air!!! A Black Church History Account Grounded in Truth Rather than Tradition, of African Americans' Evolution into Christianity and Its Influence on Christian Education and Black Identity (Genesis 15:12)" (Unpublished Dissertation, Clark Atlanta University, May 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Danita R. Redd, "Hatshepsut: The Female Horus," in *Black Women in Antiquity*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima, Revised Edition, vol. 6, Journal of African Civilization (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), 188.

and feminine. This connection suggests that Eve's ability to converse with the serpent may stem from her divine nature.

Charles Finch, an expert on the relationship between the Bible and African experiences, proposes that Eve, whose Hebrew name "Havvah" is similar to the Egyptian "Hefa," was, in fact, a representation of the great Mother serpent, the cosmic serpent encircling the world's creation. He argues that the serpent did not deceive Eve but rather that Eve was the serpent herself, embodying wisdom and divine feminine power.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation challenges the traditional Western understanding of Eve, highlighting the need to consider the historical and cultural context of the Bible, and recognizing the influence of ancient Egyptian beliefs on Hebrew traditions.

Charles B. Copher points out that the word "Egypt" appears 740 times in the Old Testament, further emphasizing the significance of Egypt in biblical history.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it is stressed that ancient Egyptians were Sub-Saharan Africans, as evidenced by their self-designation as "Kmu" (means "black" in their language).<sup>52</sup> This challenges Western interpretations that often downplay the African identity of ancient Egyptians.

Black women in the Diaspora, African American women, and African women share a common gender with other women, but their unique histories and experiences often go unrecognized or misrepresented. This misrepresentation, like the misuse of the Bible to justify slavery and oppression of Africans and their ascendants, has led to a distorted view of women, particularly Black women. This distortion stems from the misinterpretation of the Genesis 3 narrative of Adam and Eve and the emphasis on the concept of the original sin. This biblical interpretation has positioned women as the source of (dis)ease, causing a global "pandemic" of problems. Black women in particular have been wrongly maligned and

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Finch, "The Bible and the African Experience: Response to Dr. Charles Copher," in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center | The First Pan-African Christian Church Conference, July 17-23*, ed. Wilmore, Gayraud et al. (Atlanta, GA: The ITC Press, 1988), 56–57.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Copher, "The Bible and the African Experience: The Biblical Period," in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center | The First Pan-African Christian Church Conference, July 17-23*, ed. Wilmore, Gayraud et al. (Atlanta, GA: The ITC Press, 1988), 34–35.

<sup>52</sup> Finch, "The Bible and the African Experience," 52.

excluded from their rightful place in sacred history and status. Healing and restoration require recovering the truth and rejecting inaccurate portrayals. The false narrative of the “Mother of All Living” as the originator of sin has caused immense harm to Africa, its Diaspora, and humanity resulting in spiritual abuse and fueling GBV.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intertwined exploitation of women and the Earth, historically justified by manipulated religious interpretations, has inflicted profound and enduring harm. This interconnected violence, deeply rooted in patriarchal systems and colonial legacies, has manifested in environmental degradation, gender-based violence, and the marginalization of vulnerable communities. By recognizing the interconnectedness of these issues and challenging the dominant narratives perpetuating them, we can pave the way for a more just and sustainable future.

Reclaiming the narrative of Eve as a symbol of wisdom and divine feminine power is crucial in dismantling the harmful stereotypes and misinterpretations that have fueled the oppression of women. Embracing an intersectional approach that acknowledges the diverse experiences of women, particularly women of color, is essential to addressing the root causes of both environmental destruction and gender-based violence. By empowering women, amplifying their voices, and centering their experiences, we can foster a collective movement towards healing, restoration, and creating a world where women and the Earth are honored and respected.

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