

Ethiopian Women, the Law of Safuu, and Ecofeminist Climate Justice in Genesis 2

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Abstract:

Mainstream eco-theological readings of Genesis 2:4–17 have emphasized “stewardship” or “dominion” without engaging African Indigenous legal systems or the concrete climate knowledge of Ethiopian women. The Oromo moral-ecological law of Safuu, a system of prohibitions against pollution, deforestation, and over-extraction remains largely absent from biblical interpretation and climate justice discourse. This article advances an Ethio-ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2:4–17, arguing that the creation narrative, interpreted through Safuu and the lived agency of Ethiopian women as seed-keepers, water fetchers, and sacred-grove guardians, yields a juridical-ecological mandate for climate justice. The study employs decolonial feminist biblical criticism and Oromo epistemology, conducting a verse-by-verse exegesis of Genesis 2:4–17 alongside ethnographic and policy analysis of Ethiopian women’s climate burdens, the Gadaa governance system, and forest carbon offset schemes. Findings: The Hebrew adam-adamah kinship resonates with Oromo Uumaa (creation as family); the prohibition of the tree of knowledge functions as a Safuu boundary protecting interdependence; and the mandate to avad and samar (to till and to keep) charges humans with sacred service and protective guardianship. Ethiopian women’s watershed councils, seed cooperatives, and liturgical forest rituals enact this mandate against extractive agriculture and carbon offset projects that displace them. Conclusion: Genesis 2, read through Safuu and Ethiopian women, replaces the “dominion” model with an indigenous, gendered framework for climate justice grounded in communal land trusts, water commons, and restorative enforcement. Policy makers should recognise women’s Idir assemblies as official water governance bodies, mandate free prior informed consent for forest carbon projects, and integrate Safuu-based dispute resolution into land administration.

Keywords:

Ethio-ecofeminism; Safuu; Genesis 2; Ethiopian women; climate justice

I. Introduction

1.1 Opening hook

Before dawn in the Borana zone of southern Ethiopia, a woman lifts an empty jerry can and begins a journey that will consume half her day. As seasonal rains fail for the fourth consecutive year, the nearest water source recedes further into a landscape of cracked earth and dying acacia trees. Across the drought prone lowlands of Oromia, pastoralist women routinely walk six kilometres or more each morning, their backs bent under the weight of water that is often visibly contaminated muddy, brown, and unfit for drinking, yet irreplaceable for the survival of their children and livestock (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026). The burden falls disproportionately on women and girls, who provide 70–80% of rural water collection across Ethiopia (World Bank, 2025a). Meanwhile, only a few kilometres from Borana’s parched grazing lands, foreign owned floriculture enterprises extract millions of litres of groundwater to irrigate rose stems for European export. A single rose stem requires between seven and thirteen litres of water during its growth cycle. Aggregated across the industrial flower farms concentrated on the

shores of Lake Ziway, this extraction has contributed to dramatic lake level decline, soil degradation, industrial pollution, and acute resource competition (Degefa, 2026). Ethiopia ranks among the nations most vulnerable to climate change impacts while simultaneously possessing among the lowest capacities to adapt (University of Notre Dame Environmental Change Initiative, 2025). Climate induced drought has transformed water from a shared resource into a site of gendered suffering.

This contemporary geography of thirst echoes a strange detail in the second creation narrative of Genesis. The text twice notes that, at the beginning, “no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground” (Genesis 2:5). The rainless earth of the primordial garden is a suspended state awaiting partnership: the human formed from the soil (ha-adam from ha-adamah) must till and keep the land if the earth is to flourish. When climate breakdown fractures that partnership, the biblical text provides not a justification for domination but a warning of barrenness. The problem, however, is that dominant Western readings of Genesis have long missed this warning.

1.2 Problem statement

Mainstream eco theological readings of Genesis 2:4–17 have centred almost exclusively on the question of “stewardship” versus “dominion,” framing the human mandate as a universal ethical abstraction. This preoccupation with the correct English translation of *avad* and *shamar* (to till and to keep) has rarely extended to the concrete ecological knowledge of African Indigenous legal systems or the embodied agency of Ethiopian women as seed keepers, water guardians, and sacred grove protectors. The gap is not merely empirical but methodological: Western eco theology has read Genesis 2 without the hermeneutical resources of African customary law, thereby missing the juridical dimensions of the creation mandate.

Dorcas C. Juma’s (2025) recent article, “African eco spiritualities and climate justice: Afro ecofeminism perspectives on Genesis 2:4–17,” represents a significant advance. Juma deploys an Afro ecofeminist lens to read Genesis 2 alongside Indigenous African ecological perspectives, foregrounding “the role of African women as custodians of ecological wisdom” and demonstrating that “Afro Indigenous spiritual and environmental knowledge offers vital insights for addressing climate challenges” (Juma, 2025, p. 4). However, Juma’s analysis operates at the continental scale and draws on a broad “Afro Indigenous knowledge systems” framework. It does not specify Ethiopia’s distinct traditions nor engage the codified, juridical dimension of the Oromo moral ecological law of *Safuu*. This omission is consequential: without the specificity of *Safuu*, an Afro ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2 risks remaining at the level of spiritual ethical resonance rather than articulating a binding legal ecological mandate embedded within a functioning Indigenous governance system (Telila et al., 2025).

This article argues that Genesis 2:4–17, when read through the moral ecological law of *Safuu* and the lived climate knowledge of Ethiopian women, yields a non dualistic, juridical ecofeminist framework for climate justice. This framework replaces the “dominion” model with a sacerdotal ecological mandate grounded in indigenous African law and female led watershed guardianship. Specifically, the article advances three interconnected claims. First, the Hebrew wordplay between Adam (human) and *adamah* (fertile soil) reflects the Oromo concept of *Uumaa* (creation as a single family), establishing kinship rather than hierarchy as the originary relation between persons and land (Telila et al., 2025). Second, the prohibition concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17) functions as a form of *Safuu*: a moral ecological boundary whose violation, like the over extraction of water or deforestation—brings

drought, social collapse, and gendered suffering (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026). Third, the mandate to “till and keep” (le’ovdah u’leshomrah) in Genesis 2:15 is not a call to subdue nature but a sacerdotal charge to guard the earth, a charge that Ethiopian women have enacted through generations of seed saving, terracing, and sacred grove preservation despite—and against, patriarchal and extractive pressures (World Bank, 2025b).

This study employs an Ethio ecofeminist hermeneutic, a methodological framework positioned at the intersection of decolonial feminist biblical criticism and Oromo epistemology. Decolonial feminist biblical criticism, as advanced by scholars such as Musa Dube and Madipoane Masenya, reads scripture from the standpoint of colonized and Indigenous women, refusing to universalise Western interpretive frameworks while reclaiming texts for liberation. Oromo epistemology, rooted in the Gadaa governance system and codified in the ethical principle of Safuu, offers a holistic framework that integrates ecological, spiritual, and juridical dimensions of human–land relations (Telila et al., 2025). By reading Genesis 2 through these two lenses simultaneously, the article avoids both romantic primitivism (which idealises “Indigenous wisdom” without critical scrutiny) and theological colonialism (which imposes Abrahamic frameworks as replacing, rather than conversing with, African traditions). The method is fundamentally comparative and dialogical: the biblical text and Oromo customary law illuminate each other without either being reduced to the other.

The argument proceeds in five sections. Following this introduction, Section II examines the concrete climate burdens borne by Ethiopian women and their traditional roles as ecological guardians, while also attending to intersectional differences. Section III provides a detailed exposition of the Oromo law of Safuu, tracing its origins, its function as environmental jurisprudence, and its gendered dimensions. Section IV offers a close exegetical reading of Genesis 2:4–17 through the Ethio ecofeminist lens, moving verse by verse from the rainless earth (2:5) to the formation of the human from the soil (2:7) to the planting of the two trees (2:9) and the mandate to till and keep (2:15). Section V translates the exegetical findings into concrete climate justice applications: rejecting patriarchal “Green Revolution” models for agroecology, restoring water governance through women led watershed councils, securing land tenure through Safuu based communal trusts, and reviving sacred groves as liturgical acts of adaptation. Section VI addresses potential critiques; essentialism, foreign imposition, overgeneralisation, and the limitations of a twenty page article before the Conclusion summarises the argument and outlines avenues for further research.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Locating Ethiopian Women in the Climate Crisis

a. Gendered Burdens of Environmental Degradation

Ethiopia’s vulnerability to climate change is not distributed evenly across its population. Ranking among the nations most susceptible to climate impacts while possessing among the lowest adaptive capacities (University of Notre Dame Environmental Change Initiative, 2025), the country experiences intensifying drought, erratic rainfall, and accelerating environmental degradation. Within this landscape of precarity, the burdens of resource scarcity fall disproportionately upon women and girls, who assume primary responsibility for household water and fuel collection across rural Ethiopia.

In the Central Rift Valley, deforestation, land-use conversion, and over-extraction of groundwater for export oriented floriculture have produced what researchers characterise as a

“polycrisis” of dramatic lake level decline, industrial pollution, soil degradation, and biodiversity loss (Degefa, 2026). The region’s flower farms, which extract millions of litres of water daily for rose cultivation, operate within a state policy framework that grants preferential access to land and water, often at the expense of local communities. As Degefa (2026) documents, the toxification of water sources and the clearing of woodlands not only disrupt ecosystems but also dismantle the material basis of indigenous governance systems, including the Oromo moral ecological code Safuu. The consequences are acutely gendered: water insecurity translates into extended walking distances, lost educational opportunities for girls, and heightened risks of gender based violence during collection.

Quantitative data confirm the depth of this gendered burden. In rural Ethiopia, women and girls provide an estimated 70–80% of household water collection, a time intensive labour that often exceeds six hours daily during drought periods. Fuel collection follows a similar pattern, with women bearing primary responsibility for gathering firewood for cooking and heating. A study of Afar pastoralists by Balehey (2025) found that gender inequalities embedded in customary tradition (Adda) act as a risk multiplying factor, rendering women more vulnerable than men to climate induced food insecurity and related risks. While men demonstrated better scores across variables determining adaptive capacity, including wealth ownership, household decision making power, and opportunities for community participation pastoral women nonetheless made higher contributions to household level adaptation to recurrent drought and weather variability (Balehey, 2025). This paradox, greater vulnerability paired with greater adaptive labour exemplifies the structural injustice that an Ethio ecofeminist reading seeks to address.

Tekle and Ashine (2025) similarly document the limited adaptation opportunities available to pastoralist women in the Afar region, where patriarchal norms restrict women’s access to livestock, credit, and participation in community governance. Their findings indicate that even when women possess traditional ecological knowledge valuable for drought response, institutional barriers systematically exclude them from decision making processes. What emerges from these studies is not a narrative of passive victimhood but a picture of constrained agency: Ethiopian women are actively adapting to climate change despite facing structural obstacles that their male counterparts do not encounter to the same degree.

2.2 Ethiopian Women as Knowledge Holders and Ecological Guardians

Alongside the burdens of environmental degradation, Ethiopian women have developed and sustained generations of ecological knowledge that constitutes a living repository of climate adaptation strategies. This knowledge is embodied in agricultural practices, water management techniques, and the protection of sacred landscapes.

Among the most significant of these knowledge systems is the cultivation of enset (*Ensete ventricosum*), commonly known as the “false banana.” Enset is a staple food for an estimated 20 million Ethiopians, primarily in the southern and southwestern highlands. Processing enset, a complex, multi stage procedure involving decortication, fermentation, and pulverization is performed almost exclusively by women (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2024). While enset processing can impose significant labour burdens, the crop also functions as a food security buffer during drought periods, providing a reliable carbohydrate source when cereals fail. Women’s knowledge of enset varieties, fermentation techniques, and planting cycles represents a specialised ecological expertise that is transmitted matrilineally and constitutes a critical resource for climate adaptation.

Traditional terracing, exemplified by the Konso people's UNESCO recognised stone terracing system, represents another domain of women's ecological knowledge. In the Konso highlands of southern Ethiopia, a 400 year old terracing system prevents soil erosion, conserves water, and enhances agricultural productivity in a semi arid environment (Jirata et al., 2025). While men typically construct terrace walls, women are responsible for soil management, crop rotation decisions, and the maintenance of terrace fertility. This gendered division of labour, while reflecting patriarchal norms, nonetheless positions women as the primary custodians of soil health, a role that generates knowledge of local micro ecologies that is rarely documented in formal conservation planning.

Sacred groves (debres) surrounding Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo churches constitute remnants of the once vast Afromontane dry forest. These church forests serve as biodiversity refugia, carbon sinks, and sources of medicinal plants. Women have historically played active roles in the protection of these groves, participating in rituals, maintaining boundaries, and transmitting prohibitions against tree cutting. Studies of Ethiopian sacred groves have documented their landscape scale significance, but the gendered dimensions of grove management remain under explored (Cardelús et al., 2019). An Ethio ecofeminist reading foregrounds women's unacknowledged labour in maintaining these forests as a form of enacted Genesis 2 "keeping."

Women led restoration initiatives further demonstrate the practical expression of this ecological knowledge. The Integrated Women's Development Organization (IWDO) in the Sidama region has planted more than 1,250 hectares with indigenous trees, bananas, vegetables, and fodder grasses since 2021, restoring degraded farmland while generating income for women members and reducing reliance on charcoal and firewood (Getahun, 2026). Similarly, women's groups in Gursum District, Oromia, have organised watershed conservation and integrated farming projects, implementing soil and water conservation, agroforestry, and area closure restoration (Water Knowledge Hub, 2024). Research on gendered perceptions of land degradation in Ethiopia reveals that women are more likely than men to attribute degradation to the lack of appropriate restoration strategies, and they demonstrate greater concern for regulatory ecosystem services such as habitat quality and pollination (Mponela et al., 2023). These findings challenge the assumption that restoration planning can be gender neutral; they underscore the importance of incorporating women's perspectives from the earliest stages of environmental governance.

2.3 Avoiding Romanticisation: Intersectional Realities

To speak of "Ethiopian women" as an analytical category is not to claim that all Ethiopian women share identical experiences or vulnerabilities. On the contrary, an Ethio ecofeminist approach requires careful attention to the intersecting social positions class, ethnicity, age, marital status, disability, and geographic location that produce differential access to resources, decision making power, and adaptive capacity.

Gebremeskel and Tessema (2026) provide the most rigorous quantitative treatment of these intersectional dynamics in their study of Hamar pastoralists in South Omo. Using a mixed methods design with 384 surveyed households, they applied a simplified vulnerability model across six domains. Their findings reveal a continuum of risk: female headed households (vulnerability score = 0.78), women with disabilities (0.76), and women in polygamous unions (0.73) emerged as the most vulnerable, while male headed households (0.42) were least vulnerable. These scores, derived from regression analysis of household assets, decision making power, and access to extension services, challenge binary portrayals of women as a homogeneous

“vulnerable group.” Instead, they demonstrate how social institutions patrilineal inheritance, customary governance structures, and age based hierarchies produce a finely graded spectrum of precarity.

The study further documents that women’s adaptive strategies are constrained not by lack of knowledge but by lack of authority. Women in the Hamer district practice small scale irrigation, diversify livestock holdings, and engage in petty trade as coping mechanisms, yet their ability to scale these strategies is limited by restricted access to credit, land, and participation in community assemblies (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025). Crucially, the researchers identify institutional obstacles as the primary barrier to resilience not individual deficits in knowledge or motivation.

These findings temper any tendency toward romanticising “indigenous ecological womanhood.” Ethiopian women’s knowledge is real, sophisticated, and proven, but it is exercised within patriarchal constraints that systematically undervalue and exclude it. An Ethio ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2 must therefore avoid two symmetrical errors: first, the erasure of women’s agency and knowledge (dominant in conventional development discourse); second, the idealisation of women as inherently “closer to nature” (dominant in essentialist ecofeminism). The text of Genesis 2, read through the lens of Safuu and Ethiopian women’s lived experience; neither celebrates women as natural stewards nor reduces them to passive victims. Instead, it exposes the juridical and institutional conditions, the Safuu boundaries, the prohibitions against over extraction, and the mandates to guard the land whose violation produces gendered suffering, and whose restoration requires women’s full participation in ecological governance.

2.4 The Oromo Law of Safuu: Moral-Ecology as Jurisprudence

a. Origins and Definitions of Safuu

At the heart of Oromo cosmology lies Safuu, a principle so foundational that it shapes not only individual character but the very processes of law-making, governance, and human–nature relations. Etymologically, Safuu conveys the intertwined meanings of “respect,” “distance,” and “moral boundary” a concept that simultaneously acknowledges the sacred autonomy of other beings while establishing the ethical limits of human action. As Chibsa (2010) documented in his study of Oromo indigenous knowledge in Ada’a, Eastern Shawa Zone, Safuu functions as the normative compass that guides Oromo people in their interactions with one another, with the divine, and with the non human world. It is the “inner court before any legal proceeding,” a warning bell that signals when a boundary has been crossed that “law (Seera) and constitution (Heera) may never catch, but the soul does” (Hundee, 2014, para. 16).

To understand Safuu is to locate it within a triadic cosmological framework. The supreme creator, Waaqa (God), is the source and guarantor of order. Ayyaana refers to the spiritual essence or spirit that permeates persons, places, and natural phenomena – a kind of immanent sacred energy that renders the material world ontologically charged. Seera (customary law) is the codified expression of norms and prohibitions, enacted and enforced through the Gadaa governance system. Safuu stands prior to and above Seera: it is the ethical principle that makes Seera meaningful, the “principle of restoration of human dignity” that the Gadaa system was framed upon (Hundee, 2014, para. 14). In this sense, Safuu is not law in the positivist sense of a state enacted command but something deeper: a moral ecological constraint embedded in the structure of reality itself. Telila et al. (2025) make this explicit: grounded in the Indigenous Gadaa system and the ethical principle of Safuu, Oromo Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) “offers a holistic framework that integrates ecological, spiritual, and governance dimensions” (p.

3). Safuu, they continue, is “the ethical principle that prohibits overuse and maintains reciprocity with nature” (Telila et al., 2025, p. 3).

The Oromo phrase that governs all of life “safuu, aadaa fi duudhaa” (respect, culture, and tradition) is passed from generation to generation, reminding the Oromo to “cherish the past and shape the future with respect to human and flora fauna rights” (Chamber of Public Secrets, 2022, para. 6; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025). This triadic formulation captures the inseparability of morality, cultural identity, and ecological practice. To violate Safuu is not merely to break a rule; it is to rupture the relational fabric that connects humans, ancestors, the living earth, and the divine.

2.5 Safuu as Ecological Law

While Safuu operates as a general moral principle, it generates specific, enforceable prohibitions that constitute a functioning system of environmental jurisprudence. These prohibitions are not abstract exhortations but concrete rules embedded in customary law and enforced through community sanctions under the Gadaa system. The Gadaa an indigenous democratic socio political institution of the Oromo people recognised by UNESCO in 2016 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity structures society into successive generation classes (luba) that rotate through defined age grades, with leadership positions changing every eight years to ensure accountability and prevent power concentration (Grokopedia, n.d., paras. 2 10). Within this system, environmental governance is not an add on but a core function.

The “Harnessing Oromo Wisdom for Effective Environmental Conservation” (2025) report enumerates the explicit environmental laws codified within the Gadaa framework. These include codified laws (Seera Waaqaa, Laws of Waaqa/God) that explicitly prohibit pollution of water, wanton destruction of trees, killing of certain animals, and that regulate land use and resource access (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025, paras. 40 45). Specific prohibitions traditionally included the cutting of Weyira (*Olea africana*), a native olive tree valued for its medicinal properties, shade, and ecological role as a keystone species. Water sources (Hora) are protected as sacred spaces, and hunting during gestation periods is forbidden to allow animal populations to regenerate. These rules are not merely customary preferences but are treated as binding law, enforced through community assemblies known as Gumi Gayo, where elders adjudicate violations and impose sanctions that carry both social and spiritual weight.

What distinguishes Safuu from many Western environmental ethics is its integration of spiritual sanction with community enforcement. “Violations of environmental laws carry significant social and spiritual sanctions, ensuring compliance more effectively than external enforcement in many contexts” (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025, para. 44). This is because Waaqeffannaa, the traditional Oromo belief in Waaqa as supreme creator sees humans as integral to nature, not separate from or superior to it. Mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, and specific trees are often considered sacred abodes of spirits or manifestations of Waaqa, commanding deep respect and protection (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025, para. 50 54). The concept of Safuu thus emphasises “balance, respect, and responsibility towards all creation humans, animals, plants, and the land itself. Exploitation violates Safuu” (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025, para. 54 55).

Comparative reflection with other African Indigenous legal concepts illuminates what is distinctive about Safuu. The South African constitutional principle of Ubuntu, often translated as “humanness” or “I am because we are” has been proposed as an underutilised foundational principle for environmental law. Dube (2023) argues that Ubuntu “has a role to play in the re imagination of humanity’s relationship with the environment, particularly when its building

blocks are embedded in law to address the deep socio ecological crisis of the Anthropocene” (p. 2). Like Safuu, Ubuntu emphasises relationality and interdependence, challenging the Western liberal ontology of atomistic individualism. However, Ubuntu has primarily been developed within a humanist framework, extending moral consideration to other humans before reaching toward the more than human world. Safuu, by contrast, is from its origins a thoroughly ecological concept: the prohibition against violating nature is not derived from a prior concern for human welfare but is grounded in the sacred autonomy of the non human itself. Where Ubuntu asks “what does it mean to be human in relation to other humans?” Safuu asks “what does it mean to be human in relation to the entire community of beings – human, animal, plant, and land?” This difference is consequential for an Ethio ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2, as will be developed in Section IV.

2.6 Gendered Dimensions of Safuu

The gendered dimensions of Safuu are neither simple nor univocal. On one hand, women are positioned as primary enforcers of domestic and local Safuu the everyday practices that sustain households, seeds, water sources, and firewood collection. On the other hand, Safuu operates within a patriarchal customary framework that restricts women’s access to land ownership, livestock, credit, and participation in the higher councils of the Gadaa system. An Ethio ecofeminist reading must hold both realities in tension, refusing to romanticise Safuu as an inherently feminist institution while nonetheless reclaiming its ecological core for climate justice.

Women’s everyday enforcement of Safuu is visible across multiple domains of Oromo and Ethiopian life. In seed keeping, women select, store, and exchange local varieties of enset, sorghum, teff, and legumes – practices that preserve agrobiodiversity and drought resilience. In water governance, women enforce prohibitions against pollinating or over extracting from village wells and springs, transmitting these rules to daughters and daughters in law. In firewood collection, women observe seasonal and species specific restrictions, knowing which trees may be harvested and which must be left standing. The “Harnessing Oromo Wisdom” (2025) report notes that “women are the primary custodians of this knowledge. They are often responsible for teaching children about Safuu, ensuring that the next generation understands the moral boundaries that protect the community and its environment” (para. 56 58). This pedagogy of Safuu is deeply gendered: the moral ecological law is transmitted through maternal lineage, daily practice, and embodied memory.

At the institutional level, the Gadaa system includes specific mechanisms for women’s participation and protection, most notably the Siinqee institution. Siinqee is a custom sanctioned institution within the Gadaa system “specifically designed to protect the rights of women and give them power in the proceedings of the Gadaa” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). The Siinqee stick (ulee) is given to a woman on her wedding day by her mother and serves to safeguard her rights during marital life. The Haadha Siinqee (Mother of Siinqee) is by default the wife of the Abbaa Bokku, the elected power holder, and she is responsible for protecting women’s rights across the Gadaa system. At all Gadaa ceremonies, women hold the Siinqee stick as a sign of peace, and during power transfer ceremonies, the newly elected officials pass under diagonally raised Siinqees to receive blessings from the Siinqee women (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). This balance of domains male and female is considered “the precondition for keeping the peace and promoting Safuu” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). The Siinqee is believed to have religious significance, and “disrespecting a woman holding a Siinqee is considered akin to disrespecting the god of fertility and prosperity” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, pp. 18 19).

Yet this institutional recognition of women’s power has real limits. The Gadaa system’s rotational age grades apply almost exclusively to men; women participate in the system but are rarely, if ever, Abbaa Gadaa (the highest office). The study by Kassahun (Addis Standard, 2021) notes that “about a female Abba Gadaa, I know there wasn’t one yet” (para. 43). Women’s access to land under customary Safuu is indirect: they typically hold use rights through husbands or fathers, with male elders controlling inheritance and dispute resolution. A Columbia University library record on “Between modernism and heritage: the application of the parallel legal system to the Oromo women of Ethiopia” (Alamayehu, 2012) identifies “limitations of customary law under the Gadaa system” and “shortcomings of customary law in cases of violence against women” as persistent issues (para. 23-25). Thus, Safuu is not an inherently feminist institution. It is a moral ecological framework that includes patriarchal restrictions alongside genuine mechanisms for women’s protection. Women are simultaneously custodians of Safuu and constrained by it.

How, then, can Safuu be reclaimed for climate justice without whitewashing its patriarchal dimensions? The answer lies in the distinction between the ecological content of Safuu and its gendered enforcement. The ecological prohibition “do not pollute water, do not cut sacred trees, and do not hunt during gestation” does not logically require patriarchal enforcement. These prohibitions can be upheld by women as much as by men, and indeed, women’s lived experience as those who fetch water, collect firewood, and tend seedlings positions them as more immediate and knowledgeable enforcers of Safuu than many men. An Ethio ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2 reclaims Safuu’s ecological core while simultaneously critiquing the patriarchal structures that have historically limited women’s authority. This is not a contradiction but dialectic: the same tradition* that gives us Safuu as ecological law also contains the Siinqee institution as a resource for women’s empowerment. A feminist climate justice framework rooted in Oromo epistemology must therefore work within and against tradition affirming Safuu as a source of ecological constraint while transforming its gendered dimensions toward full equality. As will be shown in Section IV, this dialectical approach mirrors the dual mandate of Genesis 2: to till (avad) and to keep (shamar) verbs that imply both careful, skilled labour and protective guardianship, of which can be, and must be, enacted by women.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Verse 4b-5: The Dry Earth and the Absence of Tiller

4b In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground. (Genesis 2:4b-5)

The Hebrew syntax of verse 5 is striking. The adverb **עַדְמָה** (terem), meaning “not yet” or “before,” introduces two negative clauses describing the pre-creation state: no shrub of the field and no plant of the field had yet appeared. These are followed by two causal clauses explaining the absence: “for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground” (NETBible, 2025; Siftei Chakhamim, 2025). The verse thus establishes a double dependency: the earth’s fertility depends simultaneously on rain from above and human cultivation from below. The two terms used for vegetation **עֵשֶׂב** (siakh), referring to wild, uncultivated plants, and **צֶמַח** (‘esev), referring to cultivated grains reinforce this distinction (NETBible, 2025). The earth is suspended in a state of potentiality, awaiting both meteorological and human partnership. As one commentary notes, the final clause “anticipates the curse and the expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3:23)” (NETBible, 2025, lines 15-17).

From an Ethio-ecofeminist perspective, this “not yet” condition resonates with contemporary Ethiopia’s experience of climate-induced drought as a rupture of the very partnership the text describes. When seasonal rains fail, as they have with increasing frequency across the Borana, Afar, and Somali regions the first causal clause (“God had not caused it to rain”) becomes lived reality. But the text insists that the absence of rain need not be permanent. The second clause points to the missing human partner: “no one to till the ground.” The Hebrew verb for “till” here is עָבַד (avad), the same verb that will appear in verse 15, meaning both “to work” and “to serve.” The earth waits for a servant-worker. Juma (2025), in her Afro-ecofeminist reading of this passage, observes that the text also mentions a welling up from below (the ’ēd) as an alternative water source, noting that “water is the medium through which the earth becomes fertile,” and that this subterranean water “signifies the hidden, feminine, generative power of the earth” (Juma, 2025, pp. 6-7). An Ethio-ecofeminist reading extends this insight by noting that when foreign-owned floriculture enterprises over-extract groundwater from the Rift Valley basin pumping millions of litres daily for rose cultivation—they are not merely depleting an aquifer but violating the Safuu of the adamah itself (Degefa, 2026). The earth’s “welling up” is not an infinite resource but a sacred gift whose limits are guarded by customary law. Verse 5 thus functions as a warning: when the human tiller is absent or, in the Ethiopian case, when the human tiller is a woman whose labour is devalued while her water sources are extracted the earth reverts to barrenness.

3.2 Verse 7: Ādam from Ādāmāh Kinship, Not Hierarchy

7 then the LORD God formed the human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The Hebrew of verse 7 is one of the most theologically charged in the Hebrew Bible. The verb “formed” is וַיַּצֵּר (vayyitzer), a term used for a potter shaping clay (see Jeremiah 18:2-4). The object is הָאָדָם (ha-’adam), “the human” (NETBible, 2025). The material is מִן־הָאֲדָמָה עָפָר (‘afar min-ha-’adamah), “dust from the ground.” The wordplay between ’adam (human) and ’adamah (ground, fertile soil) is deliberate and foundational. As one feminist biblical scholar notes, “the word for ‘ground’ (adamah) in Hebrew looks like a feminine form of adam, and therein lies the first significant gender distinction in the story: ‘ground’ (grammatically feminine in Hebrew) and ‘human’ (grammatically masculine in Hebrew). The masculine is created from the feminine, both sharing common ground. The adam is fashioned from the adamah, the human from the fertile” (wordsbecamebooks.com, 2015). This grammatical observation is not merely linguistic pedantry; it challenges the patriarchal reading that prioritises male over female. A study published in DOAJ (2025) argues that “a closer examination of the Hebrew words ‘Adam’ and ‘Adamah’ suggests a more egalitarian relationship between man and woman,” and that the Yahwist narrative “does not explicitly advocate for male primacy” but rather “emphasizes humanity’s responsibility to care for the earth” (Adam and Adamah, 2025, lines 6-10). The human is earth-person, not earth-overlord.

This insight finds a striking resonance in the Oromo concept of Uumaa. The very term derives from the verb uumuu, meaning “to create,” and refers to “all that is created—non-living things, living entities, and spiritual beings” (Yoseph Mulugeta Baba, 2015, lines 11-14). But Uumaa is not a static product; it is “a continuous process” in which Waaqa’s creative energy remains immanently present (Yoseph Mulugeta Baba, 2015, lines 15-17). The implication is that creation is not a past event but an ongoing relation. The Oromo people believe that “in the olden days Waaqa was living on the Earth” and that Waaqa remains “the source and lover of dhugaa (truth)”, a relational, indwelling presence, not a distant clockmaker (Filosofia Theoretica,

2022, lines 18-24). The earth is not inert matter but charged with divine life. To wound the earth, therefore, is to wound the body of the sacred.

The Arsi Oromo Atete cult provides a concrete ritual expression of this female-generative earth theology. The Atete ceremony is “practiced by women and is one part of a belief system that women are intermediary figures between the Waaqaa (God) that represents nature and the physical world of humans” (Oromia Tourism, 2025, lines 3-5). Women’s prayers were used “as a powerful means of terminating harsh ecological disruptions (e.g., crop failure, drought, and endemic diseases)” (Oromia Tourism, 2025, lines 8-9). The timing of the festival is not fixed; “whenever natural disasters fall, women gather and perform the ritual” (Oromia Tourism, 2025, lines 13-15). Significantly, the Atete ritual is also “a tool to counter atrocities staged against them by men” (Oromia Tourism, 2025, lines 15-17). It is simultaneously an ecological intervention and a feminist act.

An Ethio-ecofeminist reading thus draws a direct line from Genesis 2:7 through Oromo ontology to a radical claim: to wound the earth is matricide. The adamah is the fertile, feminine body from which the human is born and to which the human remains kin. Climate injustice—deforestation, aquifer depletion, industrial pollution—is not merely a technical failure of resource management but a violation of the most fundamental Safuu: the moral boundary that prohibits harming the maternal source of life. When Ethiopian women walk six hours for water while flower farms drain Lake Ziway, they are not suffering a natural disaster; they are suffering a Safuu rupture. And the biblical text, read through their eyes, names that rupture as a violation of the human-earth kinship established at creation.

3.3 Verse 9 & 16-17: The Two Trees as Safuu Boundaries

9 Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:9)

16 And the LORD God commanded the human, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Genesis 2:16-17)

The two trees stand at the centre of the garden, and the prohibition concerns only one of them. The Tree of Life represents the continuous, unmediated flow of life from the creator to creation. In Oromo cosmology, this corresponds to Jireenya: “the existence of every individual entity.” The Oromo notion of jireenya includes “the idea that everything relates to nature outside of itself” (Yoseph Mulugeta Baba, 2015, lines 5-9). Jireenya is not a substance possessed by individuals but a relation that connects all beings. It is what the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo tradition might call Heywot, the uncreated divine energy that permeates matter. The Tree of Life, accessible through obedience to Safuu, is the sacrament of this relational life-force.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (נֶרְעַ טוֹב וְרָעָה, ha-da‘at tov va-ra) is more complex. The knowledge in question is not intellectual information but moral discernment the capacity to name, categorise, and choose. But the prohibition is not an arbitrary test; it is a Safuu boundary. As Chibsa (2010) notes, Safuu is “respect, distance, moral boundary” (p. 34). It is not a restriction on freedom but the condition for relationship. Chibsa (2010) quotes an Oromo elder: “Safuu is the distance that enables relationship. Without distance, there is only consumption” (p. 34). The prohibition in Genesis 2:17 functions precisely as Safuu: a boundary placed around the tree not to deprive the human but to protect the human from the rupture that

comes when moral discernment is severed from relational accountability. To eat from the tree is to claim the right to decide good and evil autonomously, apart from the creator's order. It is the primordial act of forgetting interdependence.

The Siinqee institution among the Oromo illustrates how such boundaries function in practice. The Siinqee stick, given to a woman on her wedding day, “served to safeguard her rights during marital life” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). The Haadha Siinqee (Mother of Siinqee) “is responsible for protecting women's rights across the Gadaa system” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). At power transfer ceremonies, newly elected officials pass under diagonally raised Siinqees “to receive blessings from the Siinqee women” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). This balance of domains—male and female—is considered “the precondition for keeping the peace and promoting Safuu” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, p. 18). Disrespecting a woman holding a Siinqee “is considered akin to disrespecting the god of fertility and prosperity” (Karrayyuu book, 2023, pp. 18-19).

An Ethio-ecofeminist reading thus interprets the prohibition in Genesis 2:17 as a form of Safuu. The tree is not a trap but a guardian boundary. To eat from it is to cross the moral-ecological limit that protects interdependence. Contemporary climate injustice the over-extraction of groundwater, the clear-cutting of forests, and the pollution of rivers is precisely such a crossing. The “knowledge” that the floriculture industry claims knowledge of global markets, of irrigation technology, of export logistics is a form of da'at tov va-ra severed from Safuu. It is discernment without accountability, choice without consequence. The death threatened in Genesis 2:17 is not merely individual mortality but the systemic death of ecosystems, communities, and the gendered bodies that sustain them.

3.4 Verse 15: **'Le'ovdah u'leshomrah to till and to keep**

15 The LORD God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

This verse is the ethical heart of the Genesis 2 creation narrative, and its mistranslation has caused incalculable harm. The King James Version rendered the two verbs as “to dress it and to keep it,” a relatively benign if vague translation. But the interpretive tradition that has most shaped Western environmental thought has often fused this verse with Genesis 1:28 “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion” producing a theology of exploitation. As one commentator notes, “the very first command addressed to humanity in the entire Bible is to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion’ (Genesis 1:28). We see humankind displaying a type of dominion when it comes to pollution and extraction of the earth's most precious resources with no room for compassion, dignity or respect” (Maudlin Phelps, 2021, lines 3-8).

But Genesis 2:15 qualifies and corrects Genesis 1:28. The Hebrew verb עָבַד (avad) is the same verb used elsewhere for worship and service. It can mean “to labor,” but more often it means “to serve” or “to care.” The Hebrew lexicons confirm that avad is “used for Israel's worship of God” (Bangsar Lutheran Church, 2026, lines 6-8). The second verb, שָׁמַר (shamar), means “to guard, to watch over, and to protect.” One Presbyterian commentary clarifies that shamar “means more than just keep it neat and tidy. The Hebrew word means ‘to guard’ or ‘to watch and protect’” (Maudlin Phelps, 2021, lines 11-13). Thus Genesis 2:15 is better rendered: “The Lord God took the human and put the human in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to guard and protect it” (Maudlin Phelps, 2021, lines 15-16). As one scholar summarises, “Genesis 2:15 defines work as sacred service and careful guardianship performed before God, for God”

(BibleHub, 2025, lines 31-32). It is “covenantal”, immediately qualifying and limiting the dominion mandate of Genesis 1 (BibleHub, 2025, lines 10-15).

From an Ethio-ecofeminist perspective, the two verbs map onto the two dimensions of Ethiopian women’s ecological labour. *’Ābad* (to till, to serve, to cultivate) corresponds to the skilled, relational, daily labour of women as seed-keepers, inset processors, compost-makers, and terracers. In the Konso highlands, women “are responsible for soil management, crop rotation decisions, and the maintenance of terrace fertility” (Jirata, Adugna, & Oljira, 2025). This is *avad* as intimate, embodied knowledge of the *adamah* knowing when to plant, how to rotate, where to compost. It is not the mechanical, extractive “tilling” of industrial agriculture but a servant’s labour that respects the soil’s limits.

Šamar (to keep, to guard, to protect) corresponds to women’s role as defenders of boundaries: guarding water sources from pollution, protecting sacred groves from encroachment, enforcing the *Safuu* prohibitions against cutting certain trees. The *Gadaa* system protects a wide variety of trees, including the Sycamore (*odaa*) where *Gadaa* rituals are performed (Yadeta, 2013, lines 16-18). The water source (*hora*) is protected as a sacred space. Women, as the primary enforcers of domestic *Safuu*, are the daily practitioners of *shamar*. They are the ones who tell children which trees may be harvested and which must be left standing (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025, para. 56-58).

The contrast with extractive agriculture could not be starker. The flower farms around Lake Ziway are a case study in the violation of both verbs. These farms extract groundwater without serving the soil (“Not *avad*”), pollute the lake with agrochemical runoff (“Not *shamar*”), and displace women farmers who had practised *avad* and *shamar* for generations (Degefa, 2026; *The Slow Death of an Ethiopian Lake*, 2023, lines 9-11). The farms represent a form of “tilling” that serves only global commodity chains, not the *adamah*. They represent a “keeping” that guards only profit, not the water source. They are the contemporary embodiment of eating from the tree of knowledge without *Safuu*: autonomous, accountable to no one, and producing death rather than life.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 From Text to Policy: Ethio-Ecofeminist Climate Justice (corrected)

a. Rejecting the Green Revolution Patriarchal Model

The dominant paradigm for agricultural development in Ethiopia, as across sub Saharan Africa remains shaped by the assumptions of the Green Revolution: high input, chemical dependent, monocultural production oriented toward export markets and justified through top down technical assistance. This model is not merely ecologically unsustainable; it is structurally patriarchal. A longitudinal assessment of agricultural advisory services in Ethiopia found that “women’s roles in land management and production control have sharply declined since 2021,” a regression directly correlated with high levels of female illiteracy among rural female heads of household and the failure of extension services to reach women farmers (Lemma & Bekele, 2023, p. 45). International donors and the Ethiopian government have promoted climate smart agriculture technologies, but these interventions rarely address the underlying social norms that constrain women’s access to inputs, credit, and decision making power (Lemma & Bekele, 2023). The critique is not merely empirical but theological. The Green Revolution model enacts precisely the misinterpretation of Genesis 2:15 that this article has sought to correct. Where *avad* signifies sacred service to the *adamah* skilled, relational, attentive labour industrial agriculture performs an extractive tilling that depletes soil organic matter, destroys biodiversity, and depends

on synthetic inputs that poison water sources. Where shamar signifies guarding and protecting the land from violation, the export oriented model abandons the land to global commodity chains, displacing smallholder women who have historically practised both verbs across generations.

Against this model, an Ethio ecofeminist agricultural policy would centre indigenous seed networks and agroecology led by women's cooperatives. The Oromo Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) documented by Telila et al. (2025) offers a demonstrable alternative. Their comprehensive review concludes that indigenous Oromo knowledge contains “sophisticated strategies for coping with environmental variability, drought, and climate extremes – challenges that are intensifying with climate change,” including “traditional methods for locating, conserving, and sharing water resources” and “crop diversification and intercropping techniques that maintain soil fertility without chemical inputs” (Telila et al., 2025, p. 172). The review further argues that “co production of knowledge with Indigenous communities can strengthen ecosystem stewardship, enhance climate resilience, and ensure the long term survival of biocultural heritage” (Telila et al., 2025, p. 178). In practical terms, this means scaling women led seed cooperatives such as the Birhan Ladies Group in southern Ethiopia, which manages indigenous teff and vegetable varieties across 4.5 hectares, and the Tsigereda Cooperative in Arato, where sixteen women operate a tree nursery and seed bank under the support of the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA, 2024). These initiatives embody *avad* as relational, sacred labour not mechanised extraction but attentive, place based cultivation that honours the limits of the *adamah*.

4.2 Water Justice as Safuu Restoration

Genesis 2:10–14 describes a river system flowing out of Eden to water the garden, dividing into four heads that encircle lands of gold, resin, and precious stone. This sacred geography is not merely symbolic. It establishes the principle that water is a gift, not a commodity—a shared resource whose distribution defines the conditions for human flourishing. The prohibition of Genesis 2:17 functions as a Safuu boundary placed upon the tree of knowledge. Water justice, from an Ethio ecofeminist perspective, extends that boundary to the rivers, lakes, and aquifers that sustain Ethiopian communities.

The application of this principle to Ethiopia's contemporary water crisis is urgent and direct. The Central Rift Valley (CRV) sub basin is “known to be one of the most hydrologically vulnerable areas of Ethiopia,” where 80% of the population depends on rain fed agriculture and groundwater extraction for foreign owned floriculture has caused dramatic lake level decline (Degefa, 2026, p. 2). Lake Ziway, once the centre of a thriving smallholder fishing and farming economy, has seen its water level drop by over two metres due to the unregulated pumping of water for rose cultivation (Degefa, 2026). The flower farms “over extract water and chemically pollute the lakes and soils” (Degefa, 2026, p. 5). The displacement of local farmers and the poisoning of water sources constitute a direct violation of the Safuu of the *adamah*, a crossing of the moral boundary that protects water as a common good.

Women's watershed councils, operating as contemporary expressions of the Gadaa assembly (Gumi Gayo), provide the institutional vehicle for water justice as Safuu restoration. Across Ethiopia, women's Idir associations community based mutual aid societies traditionally focused on funeral expenses and emergency support have evolved into water governance bodies. In the Hulule Mojo community, women have taken leadership roles in managing multiple water supply systems (Water Knowledge Hub, 2024). The Mojo River watershed restoration initiative, led by women's Idir groups, revived traditional water sharing protocols that had been eroded by

decades of state led centralisation and donor driven infrastructure projects. These groups enforce prohibitions against upstream pollution, negotiate seasonal water allocations between farmers and pastoralists, and maintain the physical infrastructure of springs and hand dug wells (Water Knowledge Hub, 2024).

An Ethio ecofeminist water policy would therefore do three things. First, it would recognise women's watershed councils as official water governance bodies, with legal authority to enforce Safuu based prohibitions. Second, it would reject the commodification of water implicit in both floriculture extraction and carbon offset irrigation schemes, insisting instead that water is a common good subject to community determined limits. Third, it would apply the principle of restorative justice to cases of Safuu violation, requiring extractive industries to fund ecosystem restoration and compensate displaced women farmers (Degefa, 2026).

4.3 Land Tenure and Women's Rights

Ethiopia's land policy has made significant formal progress toward gender equality. The Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation (No. 1324/2024) mandates joint land certification for husbands and wives, and the government reports that of 7.1 million certified parcels, "77% of the parcels list women either as joint (55%) or as individual (22%) land holders on the land certificate" (Ministry of Agriculture, Ethiopia, 2025, p. 12). A study in Oromiya and SNNPR regions found that joint certification has improved women's perceived tenure security and their ability to use land as collateral for microloans [citation needed].

However, the gap between formal law and lived reality remains substantial. Gebremeskel and Tessema (2026), studying Hamer pastoralists in South Omo, found that even with joint certification, women's actual decision making power over land use is severely constrained by customary norms and patriarchal household structures (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026, p. 9). Their regression analysis revealed that female headed households, women with disabilities, and women in polygamous unions remain the most vulnerable, with access to land mediated not by the certificate but by male elders who control dispute resolution and inheritance (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026). The study concluded that "despite progressive legal frameworks and joint land titling in Ethiopia, women's land rights remain constrained by entrenched customary norms and gendered power structures" (Gebremeskel & Tessema, 2026, p. 12).

An Ethio ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2 provides a deeper critique of the neoliberal land tenure model underlying even progressive reforms. Joint certification, for all its benefits, remains embedded within the logic of private, alienable property land as a commodity that can be bought, sold, and used as collateral. This logic is foreign to the Safuu tradition, in which land is held in communal trust under the authority of the Gadaa assembly, with use rights allocated according to need and ecological limits rather than individual ownership. The Safuu principle of "distance that enables relationship" (Chibsa, 2010, p. 34) implies that land cannot be fully alienated from the community of beings human and more than human that depend on it. The adamah from which the human is formed and to which the human remains kin is not a transferable asset but a sacred trust.

4.4 Is Safuu Essentialist or Romantic?

A first critique contends that this analysis risks romanticising Safuu as a pristine, pre colonial ecological wisdom, glossing over the patriarchal dimensions of Oromo customary law. The critique is well founded. The Oromo are a "patriarchal community and there are moral and cultural restrictions on their behavior" (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025). Cases of gender based violence remain under reported due to "cultural acceptance, shame, fear, or a victim's ignorance

of legal protections” (Advocacy for Oromia, 2025). Some scholars have gone further, arguing that the romanticisation of the Gadaa system as a “sanctified egalitarian democracy anchored in safuu” constitutes a deliberate “anthropological whitewash” that downplays historical coercion, mutilation, and military subjugation (Biru, 2025). Kumsa (2019) has acknowledged the “persistence of gender inequality, the discrepancy between professed gender equality and practices of gender oppression” as among the persistent challenges facing women’s empowerment within Oromo communities.

The response is twofold. First, an Ethio ecofeminist reading does not claim that Safuu is inherently feminist. It acknowledges that Safuu has historically operated within patriarchal structures that limit women’s land ownership, decision making authority, and participation in the highest councils of the Gadaa system. However, as Kumsa (2019) has articulated, indigenous wisdom for gender empowerment can be retrieved through what she terms the “three Siinqee principles of Safuu relationality, tumsaa (solidarity) and Wallaala (the impossibility of self knowledge)”. Kumsa’s work demonstrates that Safuu contains within itself the resources for a critique of patriarchal applications, precisely because Safuu demands mutual accountability and the repair of harm when boundaries are crossed. Indeed, “when there are disruptions to safuu, the cosmic law and order that guides Oromo epistemologies, women gather and work to repair this harm” (Kumsa, 2020, p. 127). Second, an Ethio ecofeminist reading reclaims Safuu’s ecological core the prohibitions against pollution, deforestation, and over extraction, while challenging the patriarchal applications that exclude women from enforcing those same prohibitions. This is not a romantic return to a pre colonial past but a dialectical engagement with living tradition, affirming its ecological wisdom while transforming its gendered exclusions.

4.5 Is Safuu Essentialist

A third critique points to the limitations of scope. Ethiopia is home to more than eighty ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customary laws, and ecological practices. The Afar pastoralists of the northeastern lowlands have developed drought adaptation strategies quite different from the Konso terracing farmers of the southern highlands or the Gedeo agroforesters of the Sidama region. A twenty page article focusing on the Oromo concept of Safuu and highland women’s ecological labour cannot claim to represent the full diversity of Ethiopian women’s climate knowledge. This is a genuine limitation.

The response is an acknowledgment and a promissory note. The limitation is explicit: this article focuses on Oromo Safuu as a case study of indigenous ecological jurisprudence, and on the experiences of women in the highland agricultural zones where the author’s empirical research is concentrated. Further research is urgently needed on the customary environmental laws of Ethiopia’s other ethnic groups. The Gedeo Baalle system, for example, operates on the principle that “a tree could not be cut without prior community consultation and consent, or without planting four new saplings for each tree felled” (Ibrahim, 2024). The Afar pastoralist institution of Adda regulates grazing rotations and water access in drought prone lowlands, though Balehey (2025) has shown that gender inequalities within Adda act as a “risk multiplying factor” limiting women’s adaptive capacity. The promise of future work is therefore to extend the Ethio ecofeminist comparative project across Ethiopia’s diverse customary legal systems, attending to what each contributes to a pluralistic framework for climate justice.

4.6 Is ‘Climate Justice’ Too Western a Term?

A fourth critique contends that the very phrase “climate justice” imports a Western activist vocabulary into an indigenous Ethiopian context, potentially distorting rather than illuminating local ethical frameworks. The term emerged from environmental justice movements in the

Global North and has been mainstreamed through international climate negotiations. To claim that Oromo women are fighting for “climate justice” might be to translate their struggles into a language that does not fully capture their own categories of thought.

The response reclaims “climate justice” as a cross cultural coinage while also demonstrating its indigenous analogues. The term itself need not be abandoned by non Western scholars; it can be, and has been, indigenised. As Ibrahim (2023) notes, “by the turn of the millennium, the idea of climate justice was pushed by a few radical environmental justice advocates in Africa, Latin America and North America” precisely as a tool to hold wealthy nations accountable for colonial and extractive histories. More importantly, the substantive content of climate justice distributive justice (fair allocation of resources and burdens), procedural justice (inclusive decision making), and recognition justice (respect for diverse knowledge systems) is not Western property. Abe (2024) demonstrates that in African worldviews, a community is comprised of “the living dead, the living, and the yet to be born,” and that “successive generations share the environment (the land). According to African intergenerational ethics, natural resources ought not to be exploited beyond their limit” (Abe, 2024, p. 62). The Oromo, Abe (2024, p. 68) notes, “do not simply consider justice, integrity, and respect as human virtues applicable to human beings, but they extend them to non human species and Mother Earth.”

V. Conclusion

Summary of Argument

This article has advanced an Ethio ecofeminist reading of Genesis 2:4–17, arguing that the creation narrative, when interpreted through the Oromo moral ecological law of Safuu and the lived climate knowledge of Ethiopian women, yields a juridical ecological mandate for climate justice. The argument moved from the concrete burdens of Ethiopian women water fetchers, seed keepers, and guardians of sacred groves to the cosmological framework of Safuu as a system of binding prohibitions against pollution, deforestation, and over extraction. An exegesis of Genesis 2:4–17 revealed the Hebrew adam-adamah kinship as a direct resonance with Oromo Uumaa (creation as family), the prohibition of the tree of knowledge as a Safuu boundary protecting interdependence, and the mandate to *avad* and *shamar* as a dual charge of sacred service and protective guardianship. The article then translated these exegetical findings into policy: rejecting the patriarchal Green Revolution model for women led agroecology, restoring water justice through women’s watershed councils, reforming land tenure toward Safuu based communal trusts, and recovering liturgical climate action against carbon offset schemes that displace women. Throughout, the article has maintained that what the West calls “climate justice” the Oromo have long called living well within Safuu and that Genesis 2, read through Ethiopian women’s eyes, calls for nothing less.

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